

Lemon betts

Star Wars Prequel Trilogy

Complete



Lemon

betts

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This story was first published on July 11th, 2022, and was last updated on August 14th, 2022.

FicLab ID: SBRuA8lQ/lytpctrq/Bwf00C561

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Summary

title Lemon
author betts
source <https://archiveofourown.org/works/40223139>
published July 11th, 2022
updated August 14th, 2022
words 76,327
chapters 6
status Complete
rating Explicit
tags Age Difference, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Angst with a Happy Ending, BDSM, Collars, Complete, Dom/sub, Falling In Love, Femdom, Fluff and Humor, Literary References & Allusions, Mommy Kink, Padmé Amidala/Anakin Skywalker, Past Drug Addiction, Star Wars Prequel Trilogy, book recommendations as a love language, overworked lit phd student padme amidala, sexually competent dirtbag anakin skywalker, shy dom/assertive sub dynamic

Description:

“What other secret fantasies do I have that are glaring neon signs for you?” Anakin asks.

“You’re conflicted,” Padmé says, “because on one hand you want to be a very good boy for me, but on the other you want to misbehave so I have a reason to punish you.”

He blows out a plume of smoke and taps the ash off his cigarette. “You know, I really thought you were a nerd. I thought I’d have to be like, ‘Hey, how about you tie me up sometime.’ Get you into this stuff little by little. But no, you’re diving right in like we met on a BDSM subreddit or something.”

Or: Padmé has car problems. Thankfully she knows a good mechanic.

Chapter 1

*You fools who ask what god is
should ask what life is instead.
Find a port where lemon trees bloom.
Ask about places to drink in the port.
Ask about the drinkers.
Ask about the lemon trees.
Ask and ask until nothing's left to ask.*

—Ko Un, “Asking the Way”

On Google Maps the shop is called Lars Auto but there's no sign anywhere to indicate that. When Padmé mentioned she was overdue for an oil change, Dr. Kenobi highly recommended this place, said she would get good work done at a fair price, and considering she has no knowledge of cars and barely any money—and she's relatively new to the area—there's really nowhere else for her to go. When she pulls into the lot, there are no cars in front and none seem to be in the garage. That either bodes very poorly or very well—maybe they just work fast?

Inside, thank goodness, is air-conditioned. No one warned her that September in Ohio was still deliriously hot and humid. There are tires and hubcaps hanging all over the place. It smells, like all auto shops do, like motor oil. She approaches the desk and sees a young man with booted feet propped on the counter, tipping his chair dangerously far back. He has AirPods in and he's playing what appears to be a Nintendo Switch, wearing not coveralls but dirty, hole-filled jeans and a threadbare black t-shirt. He looks too young to work here but his arms are covered in tattoos, so he's either eighteen or has terrible parents.

“Hello?” she says.

He rocks even farther back in his chair and she swears he's going to topple over. He pops a bubble with his gum.

“Excuse me,” she says, waving a hand in front of his face.

He glances up, does a double-take, and nearly falls backward off his chair but catches himself just in time. When the chair legs slam back safely to the ground, he casually pulls out an AirPod and says, “Yeah?”

“I have an appointment for an oil change.”

He sets the Switch aside and clicks around on the computer. “Name?”

“Padmé Amidala.”

“2008 Honda Civic?”

“Yes.”

“Dropping off?”

She passes over her keys. “No, I’ll wait.”

The boy barely looks old enough to drive let alone do an oil change. *Can’t you find someone who was alive for 9/11?* she wants to ask. Then she remembers: Dr. Kenobi said he’s been taking his car here for ten years. He isn’t perfect—his pedagogy is questionable at best—but he is honest to a fault, and she knows this because of how cruel his comments can be on her papers. He wouldn’t have spoken so highly of this place if he didn’t mean it.

The boy takes the keys and nods to the other end of the shop. “Waiting area is over there.” He meets her eyes and smiles a little, tilts his head. “Help yourself to some coffee.”

“Oh, thank you,” she says, and heads to the back of the shop where *Maury* is blaring on television. She finds the remote hidden under a stack of car magazines and mutes the TV.

The coffee is in a pot that looks older than the man who offered it. It’s a little sludgy when she pours it into a styrofoam cup, but god knows she’s had worse—daily, even, in the department breakroom. It’s hot at least. Vaguely fresh.

She settles in and pulls a manila folder full of essays from her bag. It’s the first big assignment of the semester, a five-page short story analysis. The top one is by a very intelligent, highly engaged student, so she puts that one at the bottom. Always best to end on a high note after grading fifty papers. Conversely, the next one is from one of her least engaged students—he only attended the first class and hasn’t shown up since, so she’s shocked he even turned the assignment in—and she slots that somewhere in the middle. The next one is from a B+ student and it will likely be a B— paper. That’s a good place to start.

After the first paper (a solid B!), she moves onto the second, and has only just finished and flipped to the third when the boy comes in and says, “Mrs. Amidala?”

She glances up. Surely her car can’t be ready yet. It’s barely been twenty minutes.

“Oh, I’m not married. Miss or Ms. is fine.”

He smiles again the way he did earlier, like she said something cute. “You’re all set, Ms. Amidala.”

“Really?” she asks. “That was fast.”

“You can stick around a little longer if you want. This place has great ambiance for—” He looks at the stack of papers in her lap. “Grading.”

She closes the folder and slots it back in her bag. “No, that’s fine, I’ve got a lot to do today.” And every day. Every fucking day.

The boy leads her to the front of the shop, where he slides her keys back across the counter and clicks around on the computer for a moment.

“That’ll be forty,” he says.

Just as she locates her wallet, the amount hits her. “I’m sorry, I think there’s been a mistake. I’ve had this car for three years and it’s always at least sixty.”

He doesn't look up from the computer. "We're running a special."

"That probably doesn't even cover the cost of the oil, let alone labor."

"I don't make the rules," he says. "I just work here."

Considering she doesn't even make minimum wage as a TA, she's not going to argue. Dr. Kenobi *did* say the price was fair, and compared to DC, everything here is dirt cheap. She hands over her credit card.

The boy slots the chip in the reader, waits. "So what do you teach?"

"Literature. At the university."

"A professor."

"Just a doctoral student. It's an intro course."

The card reader beeps and he pulls the card out, rips the receipt and puts it in front of her with a sad-looking pen tied to the desk with string.

"Your front left tire was a little low so I put some air in it," he said. "Refilled the windshield washer fluid. Checked the air filter. The tread on your tires is worn out, you'll want to get new ones before winter."

She sets the pen down and slides the signed receipt over. "That's way more than forty dollars worth of work, Mr.—"

"Anakin. Just Anakin."

"Well Anakin-Just-Anakin, it's a bad business model to charge less than what you're worth."

"Do they teach you good business practices in doctor school?"

"It's common sense."

That smile again, like he's delighted by everything she says. "Maybe I just like to keep my favorite clients coming back."

There are always a million words in her brain but suddenly every single one is gone. Is he flirting? He can't be flirting. First of all, she can count the number of times she's been flirted with on one hand. Second, she could very well be old enough to be his mother.

A piece of paper spits off on a printer and Anakin staples her copy of the receipt to it. By the time he hands it to her, she still hasn't thought of a response.

"Don't forget about those tires," he says.

Just two months later comes the first snow, but Padmé is too busy to take her car in. And don't mechanics always say you need new tires? It's probably a commission thing. It's not until she skids on ice and nearly crashes her car into a ditch that she decides the boy who did her oil change was being serious about the tires. Now that she thinks about it, she's not sure

she's ever replaced them. Considering she came from a life of high-priced leases, she didn't know she had to.

When she calls Lars Auto, a man by the name of Owen picks up and takes down the appointment. She refuses to be disappointed.

A couple days later, she arrives at the auto shop which this time has several cars in the parking lot and the garage seems packed. The boy who did her oil change and maybe flirted with her is behind the desk when she enters. He glances up at her, recognizes her, and a grin spreads across his face.

"New tires?" he asks.

She hands over the keys. "Unfortunately."

It's going to take a significant portion of her paycheck, but she'd rather spend the money now than end up wrapped around a pole later.

"Dropping off?"

"I'll wait," she says. "Can't miss an opportunity for more of that amazing coffee."

Another smile, a little laugh, and oh, she doesn't like that at all. Nope. Not his perfect teeth or his messy hair or the streak of grease on his forehead or the too-tight shirt that has Sonic the Hedgehog on it. And she will not look at his tattoos. She will *not*.

"We've got donuts too," he says, "but they're from yesterday. Eat them at your own risk."

"You know what they say. A stale donut a day keeps the doctor away." God, why is she like this? Her students always make fun of her for her wine mom humor, whatever that means. Sometimes they email her rasterized minion memes. She doesn't get it.

But he laughs again and says, "It may be a bit. If you need anything, let me know."

She walks away before she says more stupid nonsense. There are two other people in the waiting room. One of them, an older man with a trucker hat, has dozed off. There's also a middle-aged woman enrapt in what appears to be a daytime soap opera. Padmé pulls out her laptop. She has plenty to do while she waits.

After forty-five minutes, the man with the trucker hat gets called back. Around the one-and-a-half hour mark, the soap opera woman leaves. Padmé is getting hungry enough to risk a day-old donut.

Someone enters the waiting room. She doesn't bother looking up. Behind her, she hears change dropped into the vending machine followed by the thunk of a can of soda. The soda cracks open. The person holding it takes a seat directly beside her. She finally glances up.

"More grading?" Anakin asks.

She glances back down and ignores her rapid heartbeat. "Literature review."

"What literature are you reviewing?"

"Psychoanalytic criticism of *Wuthering Heights*."

"That sounds... fun."

“Oh, it’s a blast.”

Anakin is draped over the chair, legs apart, sipping on a root beer. Staring at her.

“Is my car finished?” she asks.

“Just about,” he says. “I’m off the clock.”

She closes her laptop. “Well don’t let me keep you.”

“Hey, if you were to recommend a book to a plebian like me, what would you recommend?”

She uses the question as an excuse to give him a once-over. Steel-toed boots. Filthy torn jeans. Stupid Sonic shirt. His shoulders are broader than she remembered them. The conclusion she comes to is: literature for young white guys who probably love *The Dark Knight*.

“Cormac McCarthy maybe,” she says. “Everyone loves *The Road* but I’m more of a *Blood Meridian* fan.”

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and starts typing. “McCarthy. Got it.”

“You might also like Vonnegut. Again the popular one there is *Slaughterhouse-Five* but I think *Cat’s Cradle* is better. Oh, or *Breakfast of Champions*.”

Anakin continues typing.

“There’s Denis Johnson, too. *Jesus’ Son*, which is a short story collection. David Foster Wallace. *Infinite Jest*. But I like his nonfiction more. And there’s—”

He glances up from his phone. “You know, I’m not a very fast reader.”

“Sorry. I just like recommending books.”

“I see that.”

“Oh, and if you haven’t read Faulkner you should at least pick up *As I Lay Dying*, which will give you some context going into McCarthy. It’s short.”

Anakin types the rest out. She wonders if he actually intends to read her recommendations. No one reads her recommendations.

“Are these your favorites?” he asks.

“Oh god no. They’re ones I think you’ll like.”

“Based on what?”

She waves a hand over his body. “All of this.”

“Sonic the Hedgehog makes you think of Faulkner?”

“I have a lot of students your age. I tend to get a good idea of a person’s tastes based on how they express themselves.”

He slides his phone into his back pocket. “How old do you think I am?”

"I don't know. Nineteen, twenty."

He offers another of his ridiculous smiles. "I'm twenty-three."

"Oh, yes, the vast difference between nineteen and twenty-three."

"You wouldn't have wanted to know me when I was nineteen."

"Bold of you to assume I want to know you now."

He ducks his head. The gesture comes off boyish, like he's blushing. It's so cute she can barely—oh no. No no no. No thinking the devil's thoughts.

"How old are you?" he asks.

"Thirty-six."

"And you're just now in grad school?"

"Starting fresh. I was in politics for a long time."

"Which you left for a fulfilling career in recommending books to twenty-year-olds."

That is a surprisingly apt summary of what it feels like teaching an intro lit course. She wishes she could title her class "A Book Club and Three Papers."

"You could say that," she says.

"What did you do in politics?"

"I was a campaign manager."

"Never ran for office?"

"I wanted to, but it didn't work out that way."

He tilts his head and looks as if he's inspecting her. No one's ever looked at her quite so intensely, like he's trying to read her mind. She almost can't meet his gaze. Almost. "Are you happier now?"

Yes, of course, she almost says, compulsively positive. But there's something in the way he asks it, like he's genuinely curious. And it's not like she's on campus where she has to pretend to be grateful to work twelve-hour days for almost no money. This boy is a stranger to her. Who cares what she says?

"In some ways, yes. In others, no. The pay is almost nothing. I hate my apartment. This is a campus town overridden with undergraduates. I commute a half hour to campus every day and have to fight teenagers driving their fathers' Corvettes for parking. There's an adjunct crisis. A humanities crisis. I struggle to keep my funding every year, and when I graduate there will be no jobs waiting for me."

"But?"

She shrugs. "I get to read for a living."

Another mechanic—Owen, she assumes—arrives, wiping the grease off his hands with a rag. "You're all set."

Padmé puts her laptop away. Standing and shouldering her bag, she says, “It was nice talking to you, Anakin.”

He gives her one final dazzling smile. He has really got to stop that. “You remembered my name.”

“Of course I did,” she says, and stupidly, *stupidly* adds, “How could I forget you?”

Another semester down. She goes home over winter break and returns in spring barely rested, counting down the days when she can take dissertation hours instead of coursework. This semester she’s signed up for three classes, none of which are even remotely in her field of study and which are taught by phenomenal scholars who make horrible teachers. At the last minute she was thrown two advanced comp classes instead of literature, a class she’s good at teaching but doesn’t enjoy at all because of the astronomical amount of grading it requires. A few weeks into the semester she realizes the classroom vibes are all off and none of her students seem to like her very much. They don’t even laugh at her wine mom jokes.

In her head she refers to Anakin as “the cute mechanic.” She tries not to think about him, but it’s hard when she’s enduring the worst semester of her life. Aside from the occasional compliment from Dr. Kenobi and weekly trivia with her cohort, the cute mechanic has been a rare bright spot amid a weary year.

As the weather improves and the semester nears its end, she tries to stay positive. Pink trees and not worrying about freezing to death on her walk to class. Reading and studying outside of her comfort zone, which will improve her chances of finding a job after she graduates. Watching her students—very much against their will—improve their research and writing skills. Positive. She has to stay positive.

Then a pickup truck slams into her car at an intersection. She’s stunned by the impact, but when she recovers, she does a quick self-assessment and finds she’s fine. No broken bones, didn’t hit her head on anything. Her airbag didn’t even deploy. She gets out of the car to make sure the other driver is okay. He’s fine, apologizing profusely—wearing a cowboy hat for some reason? in Ohio?—and his truck doesn’t have a scratch on it. Her car, meanwhile, has gotten a little crunched. Traffic begins piling up around them. Someone must have called the police; there are sirens in the distance. She tells the man to move his truck so some of the traffic can pass through. He does.

She gets back into her car. Turns the ignition. Nothing happens. She turns it again. Silence. She punches the steering wheel and screams, “FUCK.”

It’s Monday of the final week of classes. Tonight she was supposed to draft a lesson plan and chip away at her mountain of neglected grading. Finish two hundred pages of reading in preparation for tomorrow’s classes. Now she has no way home and no way back to campus in the morning. She has no family to call. She’s friendly with her cohort but hasn’t really gotten close to anyone, no one she’d be willing to ask for a ride all the way out of town.

She talks to the police in a daze. The other driver gets cited for running the red light and thankfully doesn’t even try to deny it was his fault. They trade insurance information. God,

she doesn't have time to fight with the insurance people. Her car insurance is terrible. She's so far behind, she has so much to do—

The tow truck arrives. As she gets her things out of her car, the tow driver says, "Where's she headed?" *She* being the car.

"Lars Auto," she says. "Can I ride with you?"

She manages to hold it together during the drive. The driver whistles a Pink Floyd song and doesn't try to make conversation. She can't stop shaking.

He lets her out in front and takes her car to the back. She enters the auto shop looking at her phone, comparing the cost of an Uber versus a Lyft. The price for both is so much more than she can afford, and there's a chance she'll have to pay a five hundred dollar deductible on her car, assuming it's not totaled. And if it is totaled...

"Padmé? Are you okay?"

She glances up and finds Anakin circling the desk. At what point in their meager two interactions did she go from Ms. Amidala to Padmé?

She swallows, has trouble breathing. "I got into an accident. The tow driver brought me here. I need—" A hitch in her breath. She's endured political campaigns infinitely more stressful than this. This is nothing. Why is she reacting this way? She's getting soft. "I need to find a ride home."

He grabs a set of keys from the desk. "Yeah, sure, let's go."

"No, no, it's okay. I'll get an Uber. You don't have to do that."

"An Uber's gotta cost like a hundred bucks all the way out here. Let me give you a ride."

"I live far away."

"So?"

Owen comes in from the back and says, "Miss Amidala?"

"Yes?"

"I took a quick look at your car. It's pretty banged up. Body work's going to take a while."

"I don't need body work. I just need it to run."

"That'll still take a couple days."

"Let me go look at it," Anakin says, and runs off to the garage.

Owen nods to the waiting area and says, "Go ahead and have a seat."

Padmé sits down in what she's come to consider her usual seat. The place is empty of customers. No donuts today, and it's late enough in the afternoon that there's no coffee either. The TV, thankfully, is off. She rests her elbows on her knees and buries her face in her hands. If this had happened any other week, she would have been fine. Any other day even. But it just had to be today. The day before the single busiest and most important day of this entire horrible semester.

“Hey,” Anakin says, coming to sit beside her. “Owen’s going to get started on your car before he heads home tonight, and I can drive you home or to a rental place or something.”

A rental. God, how much would that cost? How many days would she need it? There’s no way her insurance would cover it.

“Aren’t you closed?” she asks. “It’s late.”

“Yeah, but”—he bumps her shoulder with his— “favorite client, remember?”

“I’ve only been here twice.”

“What can I say? You leave a strong impression.”

She rests her forehead on her clasped hands which are still shaking. “Good to know.”

“Let me give you a ride. If it makes you feel better, I won’t even be humble about it. I’ll keep telling you how inconvenienced I am and bug you for gas money.”

She smiles a little at that. “Is it? An inconvenience?”

“Yes, you’re really eating into my very busy evening of playing video games and watching YouTube.”

“Okay,” she says, too tired to put up a fight. It’s this or a hundred-dollar Uber that’ll take an hour to get here. “I’ll take the ride.”

She guesses she expected Anakin, being a mechanic, would drive something... fancy. But no, he drives some kind of seventies muscle car that looks like a metaphor for a penis and can probably go two hundred miles an hour. It’s so low to the ground that she falls rather than climbs into it. There are wires hanging down in the footwell and the door to the glovebox is dangling half off its hinges. Thank god it has seat belts.

Anakin hands her his phone and she types her address into Google Maps. A tape waits in the cassette deck. The ashtray is full of cigarette butts. When Anakin starts the car, the engine is so loud she startles.

He revs it a little while he lights a cigarette. He’s wearing aviator sunglasses. “You mind?”

Yes, she absolutely does mind, but it’s not her car and he’s the one doing her a favor. “It’s fine.”

“Want one?”

“No, thank you.”

Cigarette perched between his lips, he pulls out of the parking lot.

Once they reach the highway, Anakin says, “I read most of the books you recommended. Didn’t make it through *Infinite Jest*, but god I tried.”

She perks up a little. “Did you like any of them?”

"I liked *Jesus' Son* more than I thought, *Cat's Cradle* less than I thought. McCarthy was like watching a Coen brothers movie. Which, then I figured out *No Country for Old Men* was McCarthy, so that made sense." He glances over and exhales a plume of smoke. "I'd like to try a few of your favorites next."

"My favorites are grouped by major literary movement."

"Of course they are." He gives her that delighted smile again, which is nice considering most people get annoyed when Padmé says things like that. "How about the book you've re-read the most?"

She has to think about that. "*The Secret Garden* I guess. I read it dozens of times when I was a kid."

"I'll start there then."

"Why do you want to read my favorite books?"

He shrugs. "You seem like you have good taste, and I like trying new things."

Any other time she'd love to drill him about the books she recommended, really get into a conversation about it, but today she doesn't have the energy. She rests her head against the window and closes her eyes. He drives far more safely than she thought he would. When she opens them again ten, twenty minutes later, Anakin is pulling up to the curb in front of her apartment.

He puts the car in park. At some point he'd finished his cigarette and didn't light another. "So what's the plan now?"

She considers it even though she doesn't want to. "When I go inside, I'll call my insurance company." Her chin starts to tremble. "Then I'll see how much it costs to book a rental." Her eyes water, but she keeps it in, pushes it down. "Then I'll finish my lesson plan for—" There's so much to do. There's just so much to do. She won't sleep tonight. Tomorrow she'll have to book an Uber to the rental place to rent the car and then go to campus, and she can barely afford rent, how can she afford all that? She used to have such a nice life, never had to worry about anything like this, and she blew it up, all for what? Some kind of moral high ground? Did she really believe academia would be any less corrupt than politics?

A sob escapes her. Now that it's out she can't put it back in, covers her face with her hands and cries.

Anakin rubs her back. "It's okay. A crash can rattle anyone."

"This is so embarrassing, I'm so sorry," she says, wiping her eyes delicately so as not to smear her makeup, which is probably a lost cause.

"I cry all the time. Those dog adoption commercials? Bam. One-hit KO."

"Thank you for the ride," she says weakly, desperate to get out of the car at the same time she knows that the second she steps into her apartment she'll have to suck it up and get her work done. "I'd invite you in, but now's just—"

"Not a good time, I know."

"I just, I wish I had my car back. That's all I want. Then I could get through this last awful week of this awful semester."

Him rubbing her back feels good. His hands are so big, and he's been so kind. A different time, a different place, she could just—

"I'm sorry," she says, pushing open the door. "Thank you for the ride. I really appreciate it."

"Any time," he says, and even though it's just a platitude, she lets herself imagine he means it.

At four a.m. she crashes hard at her kitchen table. At six a.m. her alarm goes off. She feels like she's been hit by a truck, which—well, she kind of has. Yesterday she wasn't in any pain but this morning there's an ache in her shoulder and neck, and when she strips off her clothes to take a shower she sees a long bruise down her chest from the seat belt. As she showers she repeats the day's agenda in her head: Uber, rental car, campus, class, class, office hours, class, home, read, grade, sleep.

Once she's dressed she opens the curtains of her living room window. On the curb is a Honda Civic exactly like hers.

Exactly like hers.

She rushes out the door, not even bothering to put on shoes. The front is still dented up but that's okay. She climbs in and turns the ignition. It revs to life like it's brand new.

A folded piece of paper sits on the dash. The bill, she guesses. She takes it, opens it, and in messy small handwriting reads, *As you wish*.

Not having to pick up a rental now, she's able to sleep three more hours before she leaves for campus. It makes a world of difference. The day is as long and stressful as she knew it would be but for some reason she feels lighter, like it's still the hopeful part of the semester at the beginning and not the agonizing slog through the end.

She never ends up calling her car insurance company and the other driver's insurance company doesn't call her. She waits for Lars Auto to send her a bill but none comes. She knows she should call and thank Anakin for whatever magic he used to repair her car and drop it off to her, but the last week of classes nearly destroys her, finals week is worse, and the three days after finals week for grading make her delirious with exhaustion. If she has to fix even one more works cited page, she'll scream.

Fifty pages of critical writing and four hundred graded assignments later, she's finally free. Summer. Three months all to herself. And by "all to herself" she means studying for comps, but it's fine. Her time is her own and that's what matters.

She can no longer put it off. Anakin did her a phenomenal favor and she hasn't even thanked him. She's not used to kindness like that. Kindness wasn't really part of her old life.

When she calls, Owen answers.

“May I speak to Anakin please?” she asks.

A grunt of affirmation, followed by a distant, “Ani!”

Moments later, Anakin says, “Hello?”

“Hi,” Padmé says, forgetting what words are.

“Hi...?”

She clears her throat. “This is Padmé.” A pause. “Amidala.”

“Right, because I know so many Padmés.”

Thank you, she intends to say. But what comes out is, “I was calling to pay my bill.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I have to give you something for all the trouble I put you through.”

“Please believe me when I say it was my pleasure.”

God, he’s so sweet. How can someone so sweet possibly survive in such a hard world?

“Let me—” *take you out to dinner*, she almost says. Even if she only means it in a friendly way, it’s still inappropriate. She’s so much older than him.

“Let you what?”

“Let me at least reimburse you for gas. That thing you drive can’t possibly get good mileage.”

He laughs. “Oh it doesn’t, but it’s fine. By the way, I loved *The Secret Garden*.”

“You did?”

“I feel bad for Mary. She got kicked out of her own story.”

“That’s the topic of a lot of scholar—wait, don’t change the subject.”

“What should I read next?”

“I don’t know, tell me more about what you like.”

“I don’t care what I like. I want to read what you like.”

“*Beloved*. Toni Morrison.”

“I’ll get right on it.”

“Anakin, please let me—”

He makes a bunch of crackling static sounds between, “Can’t hear y—break—up.”

“This is a landline.”

More static sounds. “See you for your next oil change, bye.” And he hangs up.

She tries very hard to forget about him, but it's difficult when she has nothing pressing to do and nowhere she needs to be. She sits out on her balcony in the thick heat of summer and tries to read, but she gets distracted thinking about books she might want to recommend to him next, why he would do something so nice for her, his *As you wish*.

The sticker on her car windshield says she's due for an oil change on June 5th. She counts down to it, every day chipping away a little more at the whole "inappropriate age difference" thing. She could take him out for lunch maybe. There's nothing weird about buying lunch for someone who did her a big favor. She used to have lunch with people all the time. She can keep it professional.

On June 5th, she ends up spending far too much time on her makeup and picking out her outfit. In her old life she had expensive blouses, fitted suits, pencil skirts. So many pairs of heels. Every day she dried and straightened her hair, put it in an impossibly tight bun. She's glad that now she can wear flowy things and let her hair stay curly. Sure, she could wear her old clothes to class and make her students terrified of her, but that's not very good pedagogy.

She wonders what Anakin likes.

In the end she decides on a floral sundress, low-necked and an inch too short at the hem, with a pair of wedge heels. If nothing else, the outfit makes her look a little younger. Maybe he won't think she's a decrepit old woman.

At the auto shop, she finds him in much the same state she'd found him in when they first met. AirPods, Switch, tilting his chair too far back. This time, instead of trying to get his attention, she pushes the bottom of his boot. He scrambles to keep his balance as the chair falls back, but doesn't make it, and ends up toppling over.

He hops back to his feet and straightens his clothes, which are just as worn out and oil-stained as always. He glares at her. "That's not nice."

"Didn't your mother ever tell you not to tip your chair back?"

Something flickers across his face. Did she say something wrong? Then he returns to looking surly and says, "Yeah, she did, but who follows all their mother's rules?"

"Well if I were your mother, I'd expect you to follow all of them."

For some reason he does his little head-duck at that and occupies himself with the computer. "Did you have an appointment?"

"I was just in the area. Thought I'd get an oil change." She passes her keys over. "Or are you too busy?"

"Do I look busy?"

"Not at all."

He takes the keys. "I'll be done soon. You can have a seat."

She sits down in her usual seat in the waiting area and pulls a book out of her purse. After five minutes she realizes she hasn't taken in a single word, flips back to where she started and tries again. Maybe she's misread the situation. Her sister Dormé is always pointing out when

Padmé gets hit on, but Padmé doesn't see it. People are just nice, that's all. And some people like Anakin are probably serial flirts. He doesn't mean anything by it. She's reading too far into things.

The problem is, let's say she read the situation correctly—what would she do then? She's never really dated before, never been in a relationship. She fooled around a little in high school and college but it was nothing revolutionary. Once she graduated and got a job, every second of her life became devoted to it. But even though she was dedicated and driven, she always felt out of place in politics, like she wasn't meant to be there. Even if people *did* hit on her, she wouldn't have wanted to date in DC, not in the circles she was in. Great professional contacts tend to be people you'd never want to know personally.

Now she has the time and energy and clarity to date, but it feels too late. She wouldn't know where to begin. Who at her age would want to date someone who has almost no sexual or romantic experience?

Eventually she gives up on the book and shoves it back in her purse. She reads the closed captions of *The Price Is Right* on TV instead of unmuting it. She paces around the little waiting area for a while before she can't stand it anymore. Then she returns to the front, rounds the desk, and enters the garage. Hers is the only car in it. Anakin is bent over the engine.

"Almost done?" she asks.

He slams his head against the hood. As he turns around, rubbing his head, he says, "You're not supposed to be back here."

"I was just wondering what was taking so long."

"It hasn't even been ten minutes."

"I thought you were faster than that."

"Your air filter needs replaced. Excuse me for taking a little extra time."

She cocks her head at him. "Were you going to charge me for the air filter?"

"Well I *wasn't*." He's still rubbing his head. "Why are you in such a good mood?"

"It's summer. No classes. Full night's sleep. Lots of free time. Lunch with the guy who fixes my car."

She watches him go on a little face journey before he finally lands on that last part. "You want to take me out to lunch?"

"Yep."

"This isn't to pay me back is it?"

"It's not to pay you back, it's to thank you properly. You will let me thank you, right?"

He hesitates, like the thought of accepting thanks for gratuitous kindness might somehow be rude. Midwesterners are so weird.

“Look,” she says, “I’m just a sad old lady who’d like to spend time with the strapping young lad who enjoys humoring her.”

“Humoring you. You think I’m—also, you look like you still get carded at bars, so I don’t want to hear it.” He turns back to the engine. “Give me another minute. I’m almost done.”

She takes him to the coffee shop where all the grad students hang out, not because she likes it but because it’s the only place she knows of that’s not teeming with undergraduates. Thankfully there’s no one there she knows since everyone went home for the summer. Not that she’s embarrassed to be with Anakin, it’s just—

He stands a little too close to her in line. She doesn’t step away. From this position he’s much larger than he seemed behind the desk or bent over an engine. The top of her head doesn’t reach his chin. As he inspects the menu, she lets herself glance at his tattoos but can’t really make them out. A lot of black and red, full sleeve down both arms. Wings maybe?

He orders a sandwich and she orders a salad. He doesn’t put up a fuss when she pays. They sit at a booth in the back corner and wait for their food, a little number placard at the edge of the table.

“So how do you like being a mechanic?” she asks.

He spins his glass of water around slowly. “It’s okay. Pays the bills. Passes the time.”

“I imagine it’s pretty rewarding.”

“As rewarding as any other service job I guess.”

He’s avoiding her eyes. Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe she’s making him uncomfortable. She would feel awful if—

“Am I allowed to tell you you look nice today?” he asks.

Oh thank goodness.

“You’re asking permission for it and yet you’ve already done it,” she says.

“That’s how I roll.”

“No, you are not allowed to tell me I look nice.”

For a second he looks all disappointed and blushy, and she lets him stew in it a little longer.

“You have to think of a better adjective,” she says.

He perks up again. “Beautiful. Stunning. Awe-inspiring. Crazy hot. Gorg—”

“Okay,” she says, forcing down a smile. “You’ve gotten it out of your system.”

“It is definitely not out of my system. You have no idea how much restraint I’m using trying to be a normal, polite human around you.”

"I appreciate the effort, but I'd rather you just be yourself. I've spent most of my life around restrained people. I hate it."

"I don't think you know what you're asking for."

She's playing with fire here, but she can't seem to stop herself. "Try me."

He runs a hand down his face. "I was hoping you'd come in today. I remembered the date I put on your sticker. But also, like, nobody gets their oil changed when they should. Drives me nuts. The point is, I was really, really hoping to see you."

"If you wanted to see me so bad, why didn't you just call me?"

"I don't have your number."

"Yes you do, it's in your system."

"I'm not going to steal your phone number from work. I'm not a creep."

Oh, that's actually very sweet of him. "You know where I live."

"I wouldn't show up to your apartment uninvited. Again, not a creep." He reaches across the table and puts a hand on her arm. "All I can do is make it painfully obvious I'm kind of obsessed with you and hope you'll do something about it."

So she *was* reading the situation correctly. On one hand, it's a huge relief. On the other, oh god she's making a terrible mistake by not shutting him down.

She shifts her arm out of his grip and holds his hand. It's so big, and rough, and even though she's sure he scrubbed his nails there's still a little black around his nail beds. "You don't think I'm too old for you?"

"You are literally the most beautiful person I've ever met. And after about five seconds of talking to you, I figured out you're also the smartest person I've ever met. In my mind, you're an immortal goddess who for some reason hasn't gotten tired of me drooling on you."

"It's early yet."

He squeezes her hand. "I'd love it if you'd put me out of my misery and tell me if I have a chance with you at all."

Of course not, she should say. Or maybe, *That's flattering but it would never work out*. Or even, *Are you fucking kidding me? No*.

"I don't know yet," she says. "I'd like to get to know you better."

He tugs his hand away and points at her. "I better get major points for not jumping up and down right now. This is a huge win for me. Look how calm I am."

She frowns at her empty hand. "I didn't say you could stop holding my hand."

He reaches across the table and grabs it back. "Sorry. It'll never happen again."

"I'm pretty sure my love language is people reading the books I recommend, so you've impressed me a lot so far."

He seems to preen a little at that. "I'll read anything you tell me to. I can't guarantee I'll understand it, but I'll read it."

"That's the most romantic thing anyone's ever said to me."

"Oh yeah? How about this: I could build you a library one day. Floor-to-ceiling shelves, wall-to-wall-to-wall, one of those ladder things that slides across them."

"*Anakin*, you can't just say these things to me in public. It's indecent."

"I told you you'd prefer normal, polite human Anakin and not—"

"Too-forward Anakin who's already planning renovations of our future home?"

"Exactly. So I'll go back to pretending I'm not a total weirdo with a crush on the hot Honda Civic lady who's a million miles out of his league."

"No," she says, spotting the server coming with their food. "I like you better like this."

Back in the shop, Padmé asks, "So what do I owe you?"

"You're going to have to stop asking that," he says. "For as long as we know each other, you'll never have to pay a cent for car stuff."

She pulls her wallet out of her purse. "Come on, let me at least pay for the oil and air filter."

"Not a chance."

"Then I guess I'll just be buying you lunch every time I need my car worked on."

"I'm amenable to those conditions." He pulls some receipt tape out of the card reader and writes down his number. 'Here,' he says, sliding it over to her. "Text me sometime."

She takes it, folds it, tucks it safely in her purse. "Text? What is that? I only have a rotary phone."

"Ha ha. You're never going to convince me you're old."

"My only social media is LinkedIn."

He gives her a long look. "Wait, really?"

"Really. I had to have it for my old job."

"You don't even have like, Facebook? Instagram?"

"And have my students find me? God no."

There are other reasons too, but she doesn't need to get into that.

"Call me. Text me. Carrier pigeon me. Whatever," Anakin says. "As long as I get to see you again."

The bell over the door rings and two men come in.

"I will," Padmé says, already regretting the promise, and ducks out before she makes the situation worse.

She doesn't text him. Instead she overthinks the whole thing until she nearly works herself into a migraine and decides to call her sister. Surely Dormé, ever pragmatic, will tell her she's being ridiculous even entertaining the thought of courting a twentysomething mechanic.

"I have a problem," Padmé says.

"Can't just call me to say hi, how are you, has med school killed you yet?"

"Mom would have told me if you were dead."

"That's not—okay, what's the problem?"

There are raucous kid noises in the background. Padmé is inching toward forty and she's just now working through the competitive nature of her relationship with her sister. Her sister, who married at twenty-two and had her first baby at twenty-five and then another at twenty-seven, who is now thirty-one and is about to graduate med school while raising two children, who was valedictorian in high school compared to Padmé's salutatorian, and summa cum laude in college to Padmé's magna cum laude. The *only* time Padmé "won" something against Dormé was getting an amazing internship right out of college that launched her into campaign management, whereas after one terrible semester of law school, Dormé decided she was done working her ass off for no good reason and noped off to Europe for a few years, where she met her future husband Emilio in a hostel in Moldova.

Needless to say, their parents didn't react well to Dormé's European jaunt, but it was nothing compared to Padmé salting the earth of her former career and starting anew in, of all things, English literature. Padmé and Dormé only really started bonding after respective heinous trespasses of what their parents perceived to be a good life. Normal parents, Padmé figures, would be proud of having kids who would go on to get a medical degree and humanities doctorate, but her parents were expecting Dormé to become a Supreme Court judge and Padmé to be president of the United States. Anything less is a disappointment.

"There's a boy I like," Padmé says.

"You're thirty-six, you don't have to phrase it like that."

"No, I do. He's... younger."

"How young?"

"Please don't judge me—"

"Just spit it out."

"Twenty-three."

The sounds of one of the kids crying, Emilio comforting them. Finally Dormé says, "That's fucked up, Padmé."

"I know."

“You were nearly in high school when he was *born*.”

Ouch. She hadn’t thought of that. “That’s not… untrue.”

“Is he one of your students?”

“No, no, goodness no. I haven’t fallen that far.”

“Then how do you know him?”

“He’s my, um. Mechanic.”

“Your mechanic.”

“Uh huh.”

“So no college education.”

“Probably not.”

“He doesn’t know who you are?”

He probably doesn’t even vote, she doesn’t say. “I don’t think so.”

“And you’re what, asking my permission to date him?”

“I want you to tell me it’s a terrible idea.”

“Okay, it’s a terrible idea. You’re going to do it anyway.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes it is. Your entire life has been ‘should I do this totally ill-advised thing?’ and everyone goes ‘no that’s a bad idea’ and you’re like ‘haha suck it, losers’ and you do it anyway. Do you remember the time you wore platform shoes just to get on a rollercoaster and nearly got a concussion from your head bouncing off the back of the seat?”

“Worth it.”

“See? And the time you turned down a *full ride* to Harvard to go to Reed.”

“I liked the campus better.”

“Reed, Padmé! Their dorms didn’t even have air conditioning!”

“It’s Portland. They don’t really need it.”

A long sigh. “You know what, you’ve already pulled an insane quarter-life crisis, you might as well go for it. You’ve dedicated your entire life to trying to make this shitty country a little better, maybe you deserve to have some fun with the twink who fixes your car.”

“He’s not a twink. He’s a—I don’t know. He’s kind of beefy. He has tattoos.”

“Of course he does. And he drives a muscle car and smokes Reds.”

“Golds.”

“Whatever.”

“So you don’t think it’s that bad?”

“I mean, you’re not in a position of authority over him and you’re both consenting adults, so it doesn’t matter what anyone thinks. It’s not their business.”

“What if I bring him home for Hanukkah?”

“You seriously think you’re still going to be seeing this guy in six months?”

She pauses. “Maybe.”

“Then I’ll be sure to bring popcorn.”

She returns to the shop a few days later. Anakin is talking to a customer about replacement windshield wipers. He doesn’t see her come in. She likes being able to watch him from afar; he’s very confident in the work he does, and she imagines he’s been doing it a long time. She never thought she’d be attracted to someone who isn’t as formally educated as she is, but she finds now that was a ridiculous thing to think. What matters to her is that he’s inquisitive. Likes learning new things. Keeps an open mind.

He successfully sells the windshield wipers to the customer and they leave. Padmé approaches the desk. A moment ago he’d had a kind of disaffected expression but as soon as he looks at her he smiles like the clouds have parted and the sun is shining down.

She really has a problem, if she’s thinking of him in weather-based metaphors.

“Hi, um. My car is making a funny noise,” she says.

He’s looking at her in confusion, like why would she come here to talk about cars? Oh, right, auto shop. “What kind of noise?”

“It’s like a gluh-gluh-gluh.”

“That could be a lot of things.”

“Will you come listen to it?”

He follows her out. She gets into the car and turns the engine. It sounds fine.

“I don’t hear anything,” he says.

“Well of course it’s not making the sound *now*. It’s usually after I’ve been driving a while. Do you have time to go around the block with me?”

“Sure,” he says, and gets into the passenger side.

She pulls out of the lot and turns onto the main road. His face is pinched like he’s listening intently. He’s adorable. And today he looks a little tired, his hands are all dirty, he has a streak of black on the side of his jaw. It’s hard not to look at him while she drives.

A few streets down she pulls into the cracked lot of what looks like an abandoned Kmart. Parks at the opposite side, away from traffic. “Do you hear it now?”

He still has that concentrated look on his face. “No.”

"I can hear it over here, come here," she says, beckoning him closer.

He leans in, listens, shakes his head.

"Closer."

He leans in a little more, starting to look frustrated now—he looks so cute when he's frustrated, like a grumpy cat—and just as he's about to say something, she kisses him. An innocent peck on the lips first, in case in the interim since she last saw him he'd changed his mind about her.

It takes him a second to register what happened, to switch from mechanic mode back to horny twentysomething mode. "You kissed me."

"Yes I did."

"Was it intentional?"

"Yes it was."

His hand gently cradles the back of her neck and he kisses her again. For an instant it's soft and sweet—he's clearly trying to be a gentleman still—but she bites his bottom lip and he makes a low sound in his throat and kisses her harder. She's clutching the front of his shirt and his fingers are tangled in her hair. He tastes like the cinnamon gum he's always chewing, smells like cigarette smoke and motor oil and it's not fair how hot that is.

It's been a long, long time since she made out with somebody in a car. After a few minutes she notices he's trembling a little.

She pulls away. "You're shaking."

"Just feel like I'm dying is all. Ignore it."

Her back hurts a little from twisting toward him and it makes her feel ancient.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she asks, stroking his cheek.

"I just really, really like you, and it's been very difficult reeling myself in."

No one's ever wanted her this much before. She's pretty sure she's never been this wet in her life.

"How about this," she says. "For the next minute you can do whatever you want to me. Get it out of your system."

"I'd need at least a century to get it out of my system."

"You're wasting your minute."

"Fuck," he says, and takes her by the chin and kisses her again. This time she can barely keep up with him. He's making little sounds in his throat and he starts tugging at the top of her dress. The strap comes down off her shoulder and he pushes her bra away to cup her breast.

He lets go of her mouth and trails kisses down her neck, her chest, and says, "Is it too soon to ask you to marry me?"

"I think so," she says, but can't say anything more because her nipple is in his mouth now and he's nibbling and sucking at it like it's his job.

Now he's back to her neck, biting and kissing, saying, "I'm crazy about you. I want to eat you out so bad. I want you to come on my tongue a hundred times."

She tries to keep her voice even when she says, "Your minute is up," but it comes out half moaned as he twists her nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

With seemingly extreme reluctance he drags himself away. Adjusts his cock in his pants. She tries not to look at the bulge there as she pulls up the bodice of her dress.

"You know you didn't have to trick me into making out with you," he says.

"Where's the fun in that?"

"I'm on the clock. There are people at the shop waiting for their cars."

"Do you want me to take you back?"

"Do I *want* you to? No. *Should* you? Yes."

A beat of silence passes between them. Then he says, "Fuck, one more," and drags her in for another kiss.

When she pulls up at the shop, Anakin takes her hand and kisses the inside of her wrist. "Please let me take you out sometime."

She strokes his cheek. "What would we do?"

"I don't know. Dinner, a movie. Fuck for sixteen hours straight."

"You're too young to last sixteen minutes, let alone sixteen hours."

He gives her a dark look. "I'm looking forward to proving you wrong." He closes his eyes and nuzzles his face into her hand. "God, I'm so pathetic when it comes to you. One look from you and I want to get on my knees."

She feels a flipping sensation in her stomach. The image she conjures, him kneeling in front of her, waiting for her to tell him what to do—there's something about it that rings deeply in her, something she hasn't let herself think about until now.

"I'm a little shy when it comes to this kind of thing," she says.

"Let me make it easy for you," he says, leaning in and kissing her neck lightly. "Anything you ask for, I'll do. Anything you want, I'll give you."

She hopes he can't see the goosebumps that erupt all over her body or feel the slight shiver down her spine. "Your hyperbole is cute."

"I promise you," he says, leaving a final kiss below her jaw that does not at all help the situation happening between her legs. "I mean every word."

That evening, she texts, *Hi. :)*

In less than a minute he responds, *I swear Im not insane*

???

I just want you to know this level of intensity isnt normal for me

I was going to ask how you were doing, but okay.

I dont want you to think I go around obsessing over hot customers with car issues

The ellipses rise again and she waits. He says, *Im good thanks how are you*

Then he adds, *Actually im not good at all im freaking out that maybe i freaked you out*

She replies, *If you freaked me out, I don't think I'd be texting you.*

You keep ending your texts with periods it sounds like youre mad at me

Excuse me if I prefer to use correct grammar when I text.

Correct grammar is for emails and obituaries

That's the most blasphemous thing I've ever heard.

She adds, *You didn't freak me out. I was texting to see when you wanted to go out with me.*

Instant reply: *Now*

I'm busy right now.

Doing what?

Cooking dinner.

What are you making?

Pasta.

Christ you have to stop ending your texts with periods you sound like you want to murder me

She bites her lip and hesitates. Then she just goes for it. *I don't want to murder you. I want to fuck you.*

JESUS

Then he says, *How do you expect me to sleep tonight*

Haven't you worn yourself out yet? I figured you would have gotten yourself off a few times by now.

You are actually literally killing me

So, have you?

Yes of course i did

How many times?

Like 4

Were you thinking of me?

No I was thinking of the other extremely hot woman who drove me around and made out with me during work hours

Is it the first time you've thought of me?

He doesn't reply right away. She stirs the pasta. Her phone vibrates. Depends on if you want to know the truth or if you want me not to sound totally deranged

You should know me well enough by now to know I'll always choose deranged.

Another minute goes by. She flips off the burner, drains the pasta.

Basically exclusively you since we first met

She plates the pasta, drizzles the sauce over it, takes the plate over to the table and pours herself a glass of wine. Lets him sweat it out.

A new text comes in: I tried seeing other people

Next text: I was seeing this girl for like a month and I tried really hard to like her but I couldnt stop thinking about you

Then, I barely even knew you but I wanted you so bad I couldnt even look at anyone else

She sips her wine. He adds, See? Deranged

I think it's sweet., she says.

You think the unfounded emotional agony Ive endured the past year and the fact I cant orgasm without thinking about you is sweet

Yes I do.

I deserve a restraining order

Are you free tomorrow night?

For you Im free any second of any day

What about work?

Ill call off

He adds, Actually I cant call off but know that the spirit is willing even if the wallet is not

Then he says, But yes Im free after work tomorrow

I don't know the area well. Can you pick somewhere nice for us?

Define nice

Somewhere that would be inappropriate for you to wear your usual attire.

You dont like my attire?

I love your attire. I just want to see how you dress up.

Ok but Im paying this time

He adds, *And picking you up*

And then, I promise I wont maul you the second I see you

Your restraint will be rewarded.

Youre killing me. Then, Ill pick you up at seven. Then, I adore you

She expects his ridiculously loud engine would signal his arrival and that he would show up fifteen minutes early. At 6:59 she peeks out the window and sees him get out of a shiny black SUV. He's carrying flowers. She closes the curtain before he can see her watching him.

The doorbell rings. She counts to ten and opens the door.

He holds the flowers out to her. "I hope you like orchids."

He's wearing a black button-down shirt and pressed grey pants. He looks like he attempted to comb his hair but it didn't quite work. In all, she thinks, he cleans up nice. Part of her had been afraid he'd show up at her door looking like he's going to prom, but no. He looks like a handsome young man with a good sense of style.

She takes the flowers, touches the soft petals. "I love orchids."

"They reminded me of you. Graceful, pretty."

She kisses his cheek. "Thank you."

He looks a little dazed when she steps aside to let him in.

"I'm almost done getting ready," she says. "Go ahead and have a seat."

He comes inside and sits down on the couch, looking nervous and adorable. After she puts the flowers in a vase, she goes into her bedroom and does a final mirror assessment. She chose a red cocktail dress that she used to wear to networking functions, even though it definitely makes her look her age. Once she's slipped on a pair of matching red pumps and grabbed a clutch, she returns to the living room.

She steps between his knees and brushes a lock of hair from his forehead. He does a very good job looking up at her face instead of her chest which is nearly at eye-level.

"You are literally the most beautiful human being I've ever laid eyes on," he says.

"That's kind of you to say."

He drags his hands up her thighs and rests them at her waist. "How much chill do you want me to have tonight? I won't be eat-you-out-under-the-table bad but I can't guarantee anything better than a cartoon character with a heart beating out of his chest going 'awoooooga.'"

She continues combing her fingers through his hair. "That's a fascinating spectrum."

“Just you being this close to me and touching me is making me hard. We should go.”

“Remember when you didn’t tell me every single thought in your head? I miss those days.”

“Believe me, you’re only getting a fraction of my thoughts. If I gave you all of my thoughts I would tell you how much I want to bend you—”

She puts a finger on his lips. “That’s enough.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says against her finger, and oh, she likes that very much.

She isn’t sure why she says it, it just kind of slips out: “Are you going to be a good boy tonight?”

His eyes darken; his grip on her waist gets a little tighter. “Yes, ma’am.”

Somehow she finds the willpower to step away from him. “Okay, let’s go.”

Outside, he opens the passenger side door for her, holds her hand as she climbs in, and runs around to get in the driver’s side. The engine of the SUV is much quieter and the stereo much newer. And it doesn’t smell like cigarette smoke.

“Where’s your car?” she asks.

“You think I only own one car?”

“How many cars do you have?”

“Five-ish. And two motorcycles.”

“Ish?”

“Some of them are works in progress.” He nods to his phone which is hooked up to an aux cable. “You can pick some music if you want.”

“If I pick ABBA are you going to make fun of me?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

When she unlocks his phone, the screen that’s already pulled up is a message thread with someone named BRAT (affectionate). The topmost message he sent reads, *AHHHHHHHHHHH IM SO NERVOUS KILL ME*

BRAT (affectionate) replied, *I really really want to*

Anakin then said, *I think Im in love like I really think Im in love I feel crazy*

BRAT (affectionate): *You’re going to freak her out dude. Calm down*

BRAT (affectionate): *Isn’t she like twice your age and has a PhD? You didn’t even graduate high school*

Anakin: *I mean youre right but you dont have to say it like that*

Anakin: *I know shes too good for me lol Im not stupid*

BRAT (affectionate): *I just don't want you to make this lady a replacement mother. That's too freudian*

Anakin: *Thats a really shitty thing to say Ahsoka*

The thread ends there. Padmé quickly clicks over to Spotify and scrolls through his liked songs. She doesn't know any of these bands but she selects one at random. It's quiet and electronic-sounding.

"This is just my music," he says, giving her a side-eye.

"I told you, I want to get to know you better."

She reaches over and pulls his hand off the steering wheel, threads her fingers between his. No motor oil on his hands today.

Replacement mother. No high school diploma. *Too good for me.*

"Anakin," she says over the top of her menu.

"Yeah?"

"You're staring at me."

"Oh." He looks down at the menu. True to his word, this place is nice. An upscale bistro downtown. It even has valet parking. Anakin made a reservation to sit out on the balcony overlooking the river.

She picked out a good bottle of wine for the table and it's been cute watching him try not to make a face every time he takes a sip. He told her he doesn't drink much.

"I don't know what to order," he says. "I don't even know what half this stuff is."

"Would you like me to order for you?"

He folds the menu and sets it down. "Yes please. I'll eat anything anyone puts in front of me."

"There's a crass joke to be made there, but I'll refrain."

He thinks about it for a moment and when he gets it, he ducks his head. "I can't believe you. You look so prim and proper, but you're just as filthy as I am."

"Maybe filthier."

The server comes over and asks them what they want. Padmé orders herself the gouda risotto and roasted asparagus, and for Anakin she gets the wagyu because he seems like the kind of guy who would enjoy a really nice cut of steak.

Once the server leaves, she asks, "So are you related to Owen?"

"He's my step brother. His dad, my step dad, owns the shop. Owen and I manage it."

"I see." She sips her wine. "Do you have any other family?"

"I have a cousin who's kind of like a sister. And there's my mom. But she passed away a few years ago." Before she can say anything, he says, "Please don't say 'I'm sorry to hear that.' I hate when people say that."

"Why?"

"Because my automatic response to any variation of sorry is 'it's okay' or 'no problem' but this isn't either of those things. So I just end up saying, like, yeah it really sucks, and then everything is awkward."

"What would you like someone to say?"

"'Yikes' or maybe 'oof.'"

She nods sympathetically. "Oof."

"Yeah, exactly."

"How old were you?"

"Eighteen. She was sick for four years. Really slow... slow death. My step dad, brother, and I took care of her, but we also needed to keep the shop going, and the bills kept getting higher, and—" He stops, fidgets, won't meet her eyes.

"And?"

"I really didn't want to tell you this, but it's not right to keep it from you. I dropped out of high school. I don't even have my GED. I'll understand if that's a dealbreaker for you."

She reaches across the table and takes his hand. "Learning is what's important to me. And you seem like a very skilled learner."

He risks a glance at her. "I couldn't even make it through *Infinite Jest*."

She rubs her thumb over the back of his hand. "Honey, no one makes it through *Infinite Jest*."

She finishes off the wine. The risotto is just okay and the asparagus is overcooked, but Anakin, as predicted, seems to really like the wagyu. They share a tiramisu for dessert. Mostly they talk about the books she recommended. She gets to tell him what about each of them she values so much and a little bit of the academic discourse around them. He has a lot of insightful observations that make her believe he'd actually do very well in college.

When the server takes the bill back to run Anakin's debit card, Padmé says, "You told me something you were afraid to tell me. Do you want to know something I've been afraid to tell you?"

"Please. And no matter what it is, I guarantee it won't be a dealbreaker. Murdered somebody? Don't care. Plan to murder somebody? I'll bury the body."

"That's very good to know for the future," she says. "But no, what I wanted to tell you is that I haven't really dated before. At least, not seriously and not since I was your age. Younger maybe. I can't even remember the last time I had sex. Nineteen? Twenty? Probably

drunk at a party in college. And I don't really think any of it's been good. Just... okay, I guess. No one's ever gotten me off before."

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "Jesus christ, Padmé."

"What?"

He leans closer and says quietly, "I'm good at two things." He holds up a finger. 'Fixing cars.' A second finger. "And fucking."

"Is that right," she says.

"I swear I'm not a slut. No, yeah, I definitely am. Was, I mean. I'm yours until you tell me I'm not."

Maybe she's a little tipsy. She knows she has a doozy look on her face. She doesn't care. "You're mine, huh?"

He looks very serious when he says, "Yes."

"All mine?"

"Body, mind, and soul."

"Bold statement for a first date."

"Third date. There was lunch, then making out in the Kmart parking lot, now this. Our fourth date will hopefully involve an altar and rings."

"You go so fast. Don't you enjoy this? Just getting to know each other?"

"No one has ever accused me of patience."

"But do you? Enjoy this?"

"Of course I do."

"Even if we don't do anything else?"

"I could drop you off at home and shake your hand and it would still be one of the best nights of my life."

The server returns with Anakin's card and the receipt. Anakin waits until the server is out of earshot to say, "No pressure. But if you let me, I'll make you come harder than you ever have in your life."

Oh to have the confidence of a twenty-three-year-old boy.

"I don't think I'll be that easy for you to figure out," she says.

"You want to bet?"

"Actually, yeah. I do. If you can't make me come, you have to let me pay for *all* the work you've done on my car."

"And if I can?"

She leans forward, props her chin on her palm. "I'll let you call me Mommy."

Chapter 2

“No, seriously, did you look at my browser history or something? How did you know that?” Anakin asks. They’re waiting for the valet to bring the car around. He’s taken the opportunity to light a cigarette. And he’s rolled up his sleeves to the elbow which Padmé finds to be a very distracting image.

“I mean this in the nicest way possible,” she says. “You are not difficult to read.”

“What other secret fantasies do I have that are glaring neon signs for you?”

“You’re conflicted, because on one hand you want to be a very good boy for me, but on the other you want to misbehave so I have a reason to punish you.”

He blows out a plume of smoke and taps the ash off his cigarette. “Not cool, Padmé. Not cool.”

“An ideal evening for you would involve you kneeling at my feet while I read a book and scratch your head.”

“You know, I really thought you were a nerd. I thought I would have to be like, ‘Hey, how about you tie me up sometime.’ Get you into this stuff little by little. But no, you’re just diving right in like we met on a BDSM subreddit or something.”

“My knowledge is anecdotal at best. I haven’t done anything like this before. Who knows, I might be terrible at it.”

“If you don’t fuck around, how *do* you know about this stuff?”

“I’m widely read and have respect for all genres.”

“Uh huh.”

“That means I’ve read a lot of erotica.”

He snorts a laugh. “Of course you have.”

There are other things she knows, too. She knows this isn’t just sex for him, that he’s grieving very deeply and seeking some relief from that pain. She knows he probably feels guilty about it. She knows he’s been looking for a partner to scratch that itch for him and has a lot of hope that Padmé can be that person. She knows that even if she isn’t, he would probably still want her. And isn’t that a frightening thought.

“So, what, you don’t have any trauma that manifests itself into fucked-up kinks?” he asks. A group of people walk past them on the sidewalk and give them a weird look.

“How would I know if I haven’t had sex with anyone in fifteen years? I don’t even own a vibrator.”

His jaw drops. She never believed that phrase to be literal before. “Padmé, *no*. That can’t be true. Tell me you’re kidding.”

She shrugs. “They’re expensive. My hands work just fine.”

He walks in a little circle, scratching his forehead with his thumb, cigarette dwindled nearly down to the filter. “Are we at a yes yet? Is the plan to go to your apartment so I can fuck you into a coma?”

“I haven’t decided. Maybe we should wait.”

“I don’t want to pressure you, and I’ll respect your decision, but I need you to know you are absolutely killing me here. This is like telling me your brake pads are worn out but you won’t let me replace them. Like, you don’t think it’s a huge deal because your car stops when you brake, and I’m here saying yeah, but if you wait long enough it’ll kill you.”

“I don’t think I’ll die from going unfucked.”

“But you understand what I’m saying. You have a problem. I have a solution.”

She steps close to him, hooks her fingers through his belt loops. “And *I’m* saying we’ll see what happens. Another thing I know about you is that you don’t like getting exactly what you want.”

“Good christ you’re perfect,” he says, and leans down to kiss her.

Back at her apartment, she tosses her clutch onto the table and sinks onto the couch. She maybe shouldn’t have had so much wine, but also she wouldn’t have the confidence to go through with this without it. Anakin goes into the kitchen and somehow finds the exact cabinet he’s looking for. He pulls down a glass, fills it with water from the spout in the freezer door, and brings it to her.

“Thank you,” she says, wondering if he’s always like this—attentive, considerate—or if he’s just trying to impress her.

He takes a seat on the other side of the couch, an innocent distance away. She kicks her feet up onto his lap. “Take my shoes off.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As he unbuckles the strap at her ankle and gently pulls one off, he says, “At some point I’m going to ask you to put these on and step on me.”

“Wouldn’t that hurt?”

“Yes Padmé, that’s the point.”

He moves to the other, takes it off, places them both carefully on the floor, lined up together. “May I rub your feet?”

“You may.”

She relaxes into the couch as he gives her a foot rub. He’s unfairly good at it. She moans a little too loudly.

“Fuck,” he says. “You know I’ve been hard basically all night? I don’t know how I haven’t passed out yet.”

She bites her lip, feeling far more confident than she did at the restaurant. “Just looking at you makes me wet.”

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “I’m going to cry.”

“You’re too fun to tease.”

She pulls her feet down and shifts over to straddle his lap. He looks up at her, rubs his hands up and down her thighs. He’s so pretty like this, all doe-eyed, waiting for her to tell him what to do.

She kisses him lightly, slowly, barely brushing her lips against his. He takes in a shaking breath like he’s forcibly restraining himself. Quietly she says, “You want to talk about Dostoevsky?”

A pause. Then he says, “I hate you.”

She pulls away. “What, a thoughtful discussion of nineteenth century Russian literature isn’t sexy to you?”

“Alright, that’s it, I’m done being good.”

He lifts her up and twists her back down onto the couch. She locks her ankles around his waist and lets him kiss her the way he’s been wanting to. He moans into her mouth as she grips his hair, ruts against her, just as hard as he claimed to be. She wasn’t lying—she’s so wet she thinks her underwear might be ruined.

As he’s sucking and biting down her neck, he says, “Let me eat you out. Please let me eat you out.”

“You can try, but I’m not going to lose our bet.”

He reaches between them, up her skirt, slides her underwear to the side and strokes her. “Fuck, you’re soaked.”

She bites her cheek to keep from moaning, refuses to let him get a big head about it, but it’s useless; being touched feels too fucking good. He tugs at the waistline of her underwear. She lifts her hips and he slides them off, holds them up on one finger, looks at them. A lacy black thong.

“These are very sexy for someone who doesn’t have sex,” he says.

“So? Maybe I like wearing sexy underwear.”

He smiles at her like the annoying little shit he is. “You bought these for me, didn’t you?”

She kicks his hip. “Shut up.”

“You *did*.”

“Get back to work.”

“You really are shy. That’s so cute.”

“I’m so close to changing my mind right now.”

He takes her leg and hooks it over his shoulder, kisses her calf, up to the inside of her knee, down to her inner thigh. “You don’t have to be shy. There’s nothing you could say or do that I wouldn’t be totally into.”

“Yeah? What if I’m into really weird stuff?”

He goes down a little farther, kissing, kissing. “Considering you don’t even own a vibrator, I doubt that. And I don’t think the stuff you’re into is weirder than the stuff I’m into.”

“That sounds like a challenge.”

“It absolutely is.” He runs his tongue lightly up her slit. She claps a hand over her mouth. He keeps teasing her with the tip of his tongue. That alone nearly sets her off, and wouldn’t that be embarrassing.

It’s nothing like she expected when he said he was good at this. She figured he’d be like a vacuum cleaner over her clit and go at it unnecessarily hard and fast. Intense, like the way he kisses, like the way he looks at her. But no, he’s slow and gentle about it, and because he’s *not* trying to make her come, that makes her want to come. Occasionally he takes a break to kiss or bite her thigh, say something like, *You taste so fucking good*, or, *I could do this forever*, or, *Pull my hair. Harder*.

About ten minutes in, when he’s still in no hurry to make her come, she thinks that maybe he really is as good at fucking as he is at fixing cars.

He sinks a finger into her. This time she can’t help the moan that escapes her. She has his hair gripped in her hands and doesn’t even notice when she starts grinding against his tongue.

He pulls his mouth away but keeps slowly fingering her, rests his cheek against her thigh and says, “Want to take a break? Watch some TV?”

“I’m going to kill you.”

He slides a second finger in and it’s nearly over for her right then. His mouth is all red and wet and he’s smiling like an arrogant asshole.

“Why? Are you getting close?”

“No.”

“Good. Would hate for this to end too soon.”

Then he gets back to it, just as slow and easy as before, taunting her. He gets a little faster, a little harder, and just as she’s beginning to climb up, he slows back down. His fingers are pressing up against her g-spot and she’s losing her goddamn mind.

How long has it been? Thirty minutes? Forty? An hour? How can anyone’s jaw possibly withstand that?

This time when he goes harder and faster, he stays that way. At this point she needs to come so badly there are tears in her eyes.

“Please. So close. Keep—” True to his word, she comes harder than she ever has in her life. He’s still not letting up, and before she even has a chance to rest, she comes again, not as hard this time but it lasts so long she thinks she might pass out.

He sits up on his knees, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. She can see the tent in his slacks. He leans over her, presses a light kiss to her lips, a tiny one to her chin, that space beneath her jaw that makes her shiver. By her ear, he says quietly, “Did Mommy like that?”

Even though Padmé’s legs are doing a poor job keeping her upright, they manage to make it into the bedroom. Normally she would hang up her dress, but she can’t manage more than undoing the zipper at the side and letting it fall to the ground. Behind her and with more deftness than she expected, Anakin unclasps her bra.

He kisses the nape of her neck as she lets the bra fall to the floor with her puddle of dress. “I know you like being the boss, but do you want me to take the lead?”

It strikes her how kind that question is. It’s such a polite way to defer power to her while also respectfully acknowledging she doesn’t have a lot of experience and may not want to go hard and heavy their first time. Maybe it’s not for show; maybe he’s just always this considerate.

“I’d like that,” she admits. She turns around and starts unbuttoning his shirt, then realizes —

“Oh no, I didn’t buy any—”

He takes her hands and kisses her knuckles. “Don’t worry, I brought some. Never a good idea to fuck a guy who doesn’t bring his own protection.”

“Sage life advice from Anakin... I don’t even know your last name. It’s not Lars is it?”

“Skywalker.”

“I can’t believe I was about to fuck you without knowing your last name.”

“I’ll tell you anything. Social security number. Debit card PIN. Password to my email.”

“That’s maybe too intimate.”

He backs her up to the bed. “I’m yours. That means you get all of me. Now lie down.”

She crawls onto the mattress and lies back. Anakin bites his lip as he looks her body up and down, unbuttons the rest of his shirt, untucks it from his pants. She watches him finish getting undressed, satisfied to see how hard he is when he takes off his pants. At some point he took a condom out and now it waits innocently on the bed while he moves up her body and kisses her. His cock brushes against her clit and an involuntary noise comes out of her throat.

He kisses down her chest, cups one breast in hand while sucking on the nipple of the other.

“You’re really—*ahh*—taking your time,” she says, which is as close as she’s going to get to begging him to fuck her. She still has *some* dignity. Although it appears to be rapidly deteriorating.

“We have all night,” he says against her skin, looking up at her with that smile he had when they first met. “Unless you’ve got a curfew.”

“I just expected this to go a little faster.”

“I’m sure you did. But I’m in no hurry.”

She threads her fingers into his hair while he continues to tease her breasts. “You’re so mean.”

“Why don’t you tell me what you want and maybe I’ll do it.”

She’s not used to talking this much during sex. Then again, in her memory it was all clawing at each other’s clothes and getting fucked for five minutes in a location where one should not be fucking—cars, closets, her dorm room while her roommate was asleep.

“Anakin,” she says, intending it to sound stern but it comes out a breathy plea. She pulls his hair and he groans quietly against her skin. “Fuck me.”

He crawls back up and kisses her lips. “If you insist. But let the record show my only interest is in worshipping you.”

She gazes at his body in satisfaction as he rolls on the condom. He looks average-sized (she thinks?) but still, her fingers have been the only thing inside her for over a decade.

He rubs himself against her cunt, kisses the corner of her mouth. “We’ll take this slow, okay. You tell me if it hurts.”

She wants to tell him she’s not a virgin, he doesn’t have to be so careful with her, but then she feels the tip of his cock enter her and all thoughts flee her mind. He pushes into her little by little, peppering her jaw and neck with kisses. It does hurt a bit, a stretching sensation that feels both familiar and strange, but the pleasure overrides it.

When at last he bottoms out, he looks down at her and asks, “How are you doing?”

She wants to kill him—for checking in with her, for looking her in the eyes as he’s inside her, for caring more about her pleasure than his own. It’s not fair. It’s not fair it took so many years to have this, to even know this kind of pleasure existed.

“Good. Really, really—please just start fucking me already.”

He pulls out nearly all the way and slams back in. She shouts loud enough for the neighbors to probably hear. He fucks her like that for a long time, deep and hard, at a damning pace.

“You feel so good. You’re so fucking tight,” he says. “Hold onto me.”

She wraps her arms around the back of his neck and he lifts her up onto his lap. He grips her hips and fucks into her, the angle such that somehow she’s about to come again.

“Keep going. Keep going, just like that,” she says, and moments later comes so hard her entire body shakes with it, so intense that she can’t make any noise, can’t even breathe.

“Fuck, that was hot,” he says. “You’re going to make me come too. Christ.”

Things get a little fuzzy after that. Whatever higher mental faculties she once had are gone. Her perception of time, distorted. She can't even make herself care about the bed slamming into the wall and how pissed off her neighbors are going to be. At some point he puts her on her hands and knees, and she comes again like that, shouting into a pillow.

It becomes clear after what seems to be an eternity that all of her assumptions about Anakin were disastrously wrong. He's some kind of sex god in the body of a mouthy twentysomething. She realizes if she doesn't say something, he could probably go on forever, and as much as there's a part of her that wants to match his stamina, she also has to be a functional human tomorrow.

She's on her back now—when did he roll her on her back? He's holding her hips and pistoning into her, saying something—he talks a lot, she only catches snippets here and there—and she tells him, “You can come now.”

He smiles down at her, smug like he's won something. “Are you sure? It's only been an hour.”

“Come now or I won't let you.”

The smile drops. “Yes, ma'am, okay.”

He leans down and kisses her, sucks her bottom lip. His thrusts turn shallow. She can feel him tense up, rubs her hands down his abs, his lats, feels them tighten. He's so strong. If she were physically capable of coming again, the thought of him lugging around tires, filthy and sweating in that hot garage day after day would push her over the edge.

He comes with a low groan into the crook of her shoulder. Stays there a moment, kissing her throat like he can't make himself stop. She can feel his cock twitching inside her.

When he pulls out, she throws an arm over her eyes and fruitlessly tries to bring her brain back online. He does whatever guys do after sex. A second later he comes back to bed and has the decency to let her cool off, even though she can tell he wants to snuggle.

She uncovers her eyes and sees him lying on his side, head propped on his palm, staring at her. “What do you need?”

She shoves his shoulder. “What—how are—can word right now?”

He catches her wrist and holds her hand. “So I did a good job?”

“Fuck you.”

“You did, yes. Unless you're asking to go again?”

“No. I'm too old for this.”

“I only made you come four times. I can do better than that.”

She glares at him.

“Let me get you some water, okay?” he asks, and rolls out of bed like he's not tired at all. Fucking young people.

He returns with a glass of ice water and helps her sit up, rubs her back and kisses her shoulder while she drinks. She wonders if it was as good for him as it was for her, considering she barely did anything except lie there and have involuntary orgasms. Next time (will there be a next time?), she'll do more.

"Seriously," he says after he's given her some time to recover. "Are you okay?"

"Do I not seem okay?"

"Even though I wish I could, I can't read your mind."

"I—" Bizarrely her throat begins to tighten. Her eyes tear up. "I just didn't know it could be like that."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Does she want to talk about the realization that she's never prioritized her own pleasure before? That she's never fallen in love? That maybe she's never been happy? No, she doesn't want to talk about it with the young Adonis in bed with her who would have absolutely no understanding of what it feels like to deny yourself the most basic pleasures of humanity, to uphold the false belief that the only things of importance are higher ideals and the greater good. He probably has no idea what exactly he's given her—even if they don't see each other again after this, she'll never be able to deny it was one of the greatest nights of her life.

She shakes her head, tries to focus on his hand still rubbing her back, his eyes trained carefully on her, and not the ugly feeling welling in her chest, that she now knows bliss and may never feel it again.

Padmé wakes up first, a little before nine. She has a bit of a wine headache and her body feels like it's been obliterated. Somehow every single muscle in her body is sore. She dreads having to sit down. Anakin is wrapped around her back and it's too hot under the covers. She should have figured he'd be as clingy asleep as he is awake.

Carefully she extricates herself from his embrace, worried she'll wake him up, but quickly replaces herself with a pillow in his arms. He squeezes it against his chest, buries his face in it. Too cute. Too fucking cute. She hates this.

In the morning light she gets a better glimpse of his tattoos. They *are* wings, she thinks, ones that wrap around from his shoulder blades all the way to his wrists. The red threaded through the feathers is blood maybe? She wonders if this is his equivalent of a heart tattoo with an arrow through it that says MOM, or if it's only aesthetic.

She goes to the bathroom, gets dressed in a pair of joggers and a t-shirt. In the kitchen she puts on a pot of coffee and starts cooking breakfast: vegetarian sausage, eggs, toast. She went so far as to buy new underwear but didn't have the foresight to get better breakfast food. If the situation were reversed, Anakin would have probably had an actual buffet waiting for her when she woke up.

Just as she's plating the eggs, he wanders out of the bedroom in only a pair of black boxer-briefs, rubbing the sleep out of his eye like a little kid. "G'morning."

“Morning,” she says, and sets the plates on the table.

He frowns down at the food. His voice is all scratchy. “You cooked for me.”

“You’re my guest, of course I did. How do you take your coffee?”

“Black is easiest.”

“I have cream, sugar. Whatever you want.”

He takes a seat. “Cream and sugar then.”

She gets them out and places them on the table along with his coffee. Finally satisfied with the spread, she sits down across from him. She’s more nervous now than she was last night. After a few glasses of wine, it was easy to fall into Anakin’s gravitational pull, but after a night’s sleep, her doubts are much clearer. And louder.

After a few minutes of silence, she says, “You’re not very chatty this morning.”

He rips off a piece of toast and chews it sullenly. “I’m waiting for the bad news.”

“What bad news?”

“This was fun but we can’t keep seeing each other, blah blah blah, and then I leave while trying to maintain my dignity and pretend I’m not totally shattered.”

“I’ve heard of leaping to conclusions, but that’s more of a pole vault.”

“But I’m right, yeah? There’s bad news.”

She gives up on her eggs. She’s not hungry anymore. “You think you’re in love with me, don’t you?”

“Before last night, yeah, I did think I was in love with you.”

“And now?”

“Now I know I am.”

She sighs. “Anakin, we have to think about this.”

“*You* have to think about this. I’ve thought about it plenty.”

“Look, I really like you.”

“But?”

“No ‘but.’ I really like you and that’s the problem.”

“Why?”

“Do you want kids?”

“Yeah. Eventually.”

“If we stay together, that’s something we’ll have to figure out in the next few years. My family has a history of complicated pregnancies and I don’t want to risk it by getting pregnant into my forties.”

“Okay, get undressed, I’ll get you pregnant right now.”

“You’re not listening. I still have at least two more years of grad school, then I have to apply for postdocs. In three years, I might be on the other side of the country.”

“This may come as a surprise to you, but cars break down everywhere.”

“You have a family business. I don’t want to take you away from that.”

He takes a long sip of coffee and leans back in his seat, his breakfast as abandoned as hers. “Fine, you want to get real, I’ll get real. I hate it here. I hate that I’ve been working at the same shitty auto shop since I was eight years old. I hate that every inch of that place reminds me of my mom. This whole fucking town reminds me of her.”

“But I remind you of her too.”

He looks away and clenches his jaw. “In a good way.”

“I can’t be your mother, Anakin.”

“I’m not asking you to be my mother, Padmé. I’m asking you to give me a chance. I’m asking you to believe me when I say this is real, and not just brush it off as the idyllic ravings of an obsessive twenty-three-year-old.”

“How do you know it’s real? How are you so sure you won’t get bored with me in a year? It’s not our difference in age that bothers me, it’s that I’ve already lived through my crazy, dramatic, high-stakes twenties and you’re just starting yours.”

“Right, because working fifty hours a week changing oil and rotating tires is really living large.”

“When we first met, I told you grad school was a fresh start for me. I lied. It’s my retirement. *That’s* how stressful my life used to be. You want to know who I last campaigned for? The president, Anakin. The fucking president.”

He stares at her for a long moment. “You’re lying. I looked you up. You’re nowhere on the internet.”

“I changed my last name. It’s Naberrie.”

Anakin scrambles up from the chair and rushes into the bedroom. A moment later he comes back with his phone in hand, staring down at it. “You have a Wikipedia page.” He scrolls and scrolls as he sinks back down onto his chair. ‘When I first met you, I thought I recognized you from somewhere. CNN. I recognized you from fucking CNN.’ He finally looks up at her. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know if you remember the last election, but it was kind of a blood bath.”

He clicks off his phone and sets it on the table. “I don’t know if you meant for that to deter me, but it just gives me an even bigger boner for you. Like I went from ‘oh nice, maybe she’ll spank me’ to ‘I want you to put cigarettes out on my chest.’”

“I’m not entirely sure I understand that line of reasoning. Also I think we’ve gotten a little off topic.”

“Can we have sex before we get back on topic? I’m really hard now.”

“My Wikipedia page made you hard?”

He reaches down and adjusts himself. “Of course it did.”

They’re supposed to be having a serious conversation. She puts a hand over her mouth so he doesn’t see her trying not to smile. “You’re ridiculous.”

“I’m crazy about you. I want to marry you. I want to have kids with you. I want to follow you across the country until you find a tenure track job. I want to build you a library like in *Beauty and the Beast*. I want to read every single book you’ve ever read. I’d get my GED, I’d go to college, I’d get a doctorate just to be on your level. I know I’m young. I know I have baggage. I know it’s absolutely insane to tell you I love you this early on. But it’s true. I have no doubt in my mind that I could love you for the rest of my life.”

She rubs her temples, wishing desperately she could process her own feelings about this.

“I know you like taking big risks,” he adds. “If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have given me the time of day. But you’re probably more of a thrill-seeker than I am. You say you’re retired but you’re just getting started living the life you really want, and I think letting yourself fall for some greasy tattooed slut with mommy issues is part of that life.”

“You’re not greasy.”

“That’s the part you object to?”

“Okay, even if I don’t disagree with anything you’ve said, it doesn’t mean I’m as on board with this as you are. I like you. I think you’re hot and funny and sweet, and I want to do terrible things to you. But I’m still a product of my upbringing. I still like to think things through and test things out before making a decision. I know you’re not patient, but I need time.”

She expects him to argue, but he only says, “So we can keep dating. Getting to know each other.”

“Right, and if either of us wants to end things, we end them.”

“Yes, that is how dating works.”

She kicks his shin under the table. “You’re such a brat.”

“Ow!” he says, and grabs her ankle before she can pull away, brings her foot up and starts massaging her calf. “I’ll try to reel myself in a little, okay. Give you some room to breathe.”

“Thank you.”

“But before I start playing it cool, I want to make it abundantly clear that the second you give me the green light, I’m going to propose.”

“If your interest in me lasts more than two months, I’ll be shocked.”

He shakes his head sadly. “I can’t wait for you to find out how wrong you are.”

Although he offers several times, they don't have sex again that morning. His clothes from last night are a little rumpled, and on his way out the door he kisses her for a long time, which is making her rethink his offer.

"Tell me when you want to go out again," he says. "Ball's in your court."

"I'll text you."

He moves to leave but then stops. "In all seriousness, I care about you, and I want you to be happy. If you decide you're happier without me, I'll respect that. Just don't change your mind because you think what we have is wrong or weird. It's allowed to be. And please believe me when I say this is real for me." He pauses. "I've never felt this way before, and I'm guessing neither have you."

"We had one good night, Anakin. We still have a lot to learn about each other."

Something flickers across his face, like the first time she mentioned his mother. "Yeah. You're right." He runs a hand through his hair, suddenly looking far older than he did just a moment ago. "Okay, well. I'll see you around."

"See you," she says, and closes the door once he gets in the SUV.

That afternoon, Padmé tries to keep herself busy. She cleans up from breakfast, showers and gets dressed in real clothes, strips the bed and washes the sheets, tidies up her apartment even though it doesn't need it, and it's about four in the afternoon when she finally checks her phone. No text from Anakin. She checks her phone five minutes later. Still no text from Anakin. She sits on the balcony and tries to read, but only gets about twenty pages in before her mind starts to wander. Throughout the day she's been feeling a faint fluttering sensation in her chest and wonders if she needs to see a cardiologist.

Last night was good. It was really fucking good, and now she's left with a lot of questions and no answers. Being a campaign manager had been difficult, but there was a certainty to it she found comforting: she believed in the work she was doing, and there was one clear goal she worked toward. In grad school, she feels that same kind of drive. Just get to the end of the semester. Get all As. Teach well enough that the students who show up also get As.

She would be lying if she said that occasionally she did wonder if she'd ever be in a relationship—especially watching all her friends get married and have kids—but as time went on she became more comfortable with the idea of being alone, and throughout her thirties it hasn't really been something she's thought about. In fact her job was so stressful that not even her friends and family bothered asking her things like, *When do you plan to settle down?* because they knew in the career she'd chosen, settling down was a near impossibility. Her first and only love was the work.

She makes it to eight p.m. before she glances at the orchids, feels that annoying fluttering again, and finally caves. *Thank you for dinner last night. I had a really fun time.*

Anakin doesn't reply right away. Busy maybe? What would he be doing? Then again he did say he'd give her space and maybe that means not pile-driving his phone every time it goes off. As each minute passes she gets more self-conscious—no matter what he says, she's

sure he's still prone to rapid changes of heart, sudden boredom with things he was once fascinated by. He's an intelligent yet understimulated boy; it makes sense that he'd get heavy into anything that sparks his interest and dump it as soon as he finds something better.

Ten minutes later, he says, *I did too*, with a blushy smiley face.

She waits for the ellipses to rise again, for him to say something about how fantastic her pussy is or how he masturbated ten times after he got home. Nothing comes.

How was your day? she asks.

Good yours?

After you left, pretty boring.

My absence does tend to have that effect

She smiles down at her phone. That's better.

Would you want to go out again on Saturday? she asks.

How is that even a question

I thought maybe this time I'd make plans for us.

Yessss whatever it is Im in

You don't need to reel yourself in too far. I do like talking to you.

I respect your boundaries and your need for space

He adds, *Im sorry Ive been clingy and weird*

And then, My cousin got on my case about it today

What did she say?

Just that Im acting childish or whatever

Didn't you say your mother was sick for four years? So from 14 to 18?

Yea

So you didn't get to have a crazy teen summer fling. I didn't either. I spent every summer at Future Leaders of America camp.

Youre telling me you never got railed at future leaders of america camp??

It's shocking, I know.

She adds, *Maybe we can be each other's crazy teen summer fling.*

Hell yea lol

He adds, *Can we also have mild young adult fall and sleepy "too old for this shit" winter*

We'll see how it goes. ;)

She can't wait until Saturday. She's so bored she's begun doing preemptive homework for the semester to come. On Tuesday, she drives out to Lars Auto. Owen is at the front today. He gives her a deadpan look and shouts, "Anakin!"

Anakin comes in from the garage and grins when he sees Padmé. Sunshine, clouds, et cetera. The fluttering again. She's really got to get that looked at.

"Car problems?" he asks.

"Not today. When's your lunch break? I thought we could go out."

He looks at Owen and says, "I'm going on break."

"If you take even one minute past your hour, you're fired," Owen says.

But Anakin is already on his way out the door, middle finger lifted behind him.

They go through a drive-thru and their food gets cold while they make out. She drops Anakin off twenty minutes late.

She returns on Wednesday with sandwiches she packed and they eat in the closet-esque area that serves as a breakroom in the back, politely keeping their hands off each other given that they can be seen from the garage. Anakin asks what the president is really like. She tells him that he's exactly as he seems on TV, and assures him most politicians are secretly freaks, but the president is a nice, extremely boring man.

"It's like the country elected a dead guy and we just set him up with a hat and sunglasses *Weekend at Bernie's*-style."

Anakin blinks at her. "What?"

"*Weekend at*—god, I'm so old."

After that she keeps a note on her phone with a list of pop culture references beyond Anakin's years which she promises she'll make him sit down and watch/read/listen to.

That night, she calls him to see if he has any food allergies she should know about (she couldn't think of a better excuse), and they end up talking all evening and well into the night, until she has to sit on the floor, propped up against the wall with her phone plugged into the charger. Around one in the morning, Anakin starts dozing off, and despite his meager protests, eventually they hang up.

Thursday, they skip lunch entirely, take the SUV out to the abandoned Kmart parking lot, and Anakin spends nearly the entire hour eating her out in the back. She comes three times, a number he is still not satisfied with.

She can't think of an excuse to call him that night and doesn't think they're close enough for her to call just to talk, so she concedes to a boring night of watching TV. Around ten, Anakin calls.

"You didn't call me," he says.

"Was I supposed to?"

"No, but I thought you would anyway."

“You could have called me.”

“One, I did, just now. Two, trying real hard not to be a needy whore here.”

“You can be a needy whore tonight, as a treat.”

“Oh good, because my mouth still smells like your pussy and it’s driving me insane. I’ve been half hard for nearly twelve hours.”

“Maybe you should go to urgent care.”

“I’d rather come over to your place and fuck you into the mattress.”

She can feel her entire face turn red. “You don’t want to wait until Saturday?”

“I will if I have to, but I can also be there in fifteen minutes.”

“If you go a hundred miles an hour maybe.”

“That’s the plan.”

She thinks about it for a moment. “Okay. See you in fifteen.”

She rushes into the bathroom to freshen up, makes the bed, tidies the living room. For a moment she stands around nervously, not sure what to do with herself. Then she decides to take off her clothes. They’ll only get in the way.

Exactly fifteen minutes after she hung up, she hears the deafening roar of his engine. A moment later, he knocks on the door. She opens it and watches his mouth fall open as he looks down her body.

“Oh my god,” he says, and shoves his way inside, kissing her, kicking the door closed behind him. They make their way to the bedroom. She tugs at his shirt and he pulls away just long enough to take it off and throw it on the floor. He returns to kissing her, toeing off his shoes and unbuckling his belt at the same time, and by the time he has his pants undone, he has her on her back on the bed, one of her legs hooked over his shoulder. He doesn’t bother taking off his pants, just pulls a condom out of his pocket and rips it open with his teeth, rolls it over his cock and slides home.

He pushes her knees up to her chest and fucks her ruthlessly. It feels so good she can’t take in a full breath, can only make these pathetic urging sounds she’s never made before, and even though she thought she’d exhausted her ability to come, he licks his thumb and rubs her clit and she comes embarrassingly fast.

“You’re so fucking sexy, Jesus Christ,” he says. “Love it when you come on my cock. Got another one for me, sweetheart? Huh?”

She’s never going to have a filthy mouth like his. All she can do is nod, and a few minutes later she’s coming again, so hard she can feel herself dripping onto the bedspread.

“That’s right,” he says, and pulls out just long enough to manhandle her so that she’s bent over the mattress, slides back in, grips her hips and pounds into her even harder. “Fuck, you’re gorgeous. I want to make you come a thousand times.”

When she comes again, her knees give out and he has to hold her up by the hips. Thankfully in this position she can muffle her shouts into the bed. After who knows how much longer, she taps the mattress twice.

He slows down a little, takes her hand and threads his fingers between hers, pinning it to the bed. Kisses down her spine. “Ready for me to come?”

She squeezes his hand and nods. He goes back to his same brutal pace, and right as he’s about to come, he pulls out, slips the condom off, and comes across her back.

“Oh fuck, goddamn,” he says, out of breath. He tells her to hold on, leaves and comes back with a tissue to clean her up. She manages to crawl fully onto the bed and then collapses, body still twitching from the number of times she came.

He lies down beside her and kisses her with the same intensity as when he walked through the door, like giving her another three orgasms and fucking her into oblivion still isn’t enough to sate him. She’s too blitzed to meet him halfway, just lets him ravage her mouth until finally letting her go.

He presses his forehead against hers. “How are you doing?”

She gives him a thumbs up.

“Permission to continue being clingy and weird?”

She nods.

He cards his fingers through her hair. “I’m so insane about you. I think I’m losing my mind. It’s like, I can’t get close enough. Like I want to crawl inside you.”

Maybe if she were less fucked out she’d think that was a disconcerting thing to say. But as such she can only nod and go, “Makes sense.”

“Do you believe in soulmates?”

She shrugs with what little energy she has remaining. “Haven’t thought about it.”

“Before I met you I didn’t believe in them. But now—sorry, this is too much.”

It is. It is definitely too much. And yet she wants to hear it so badly, all of it, all of his unhealthy obsessive thoughts, all his dreams for their future. She wants to hear it so it can be made real, so she can let herself dream of it too.

But she can’t say that. She’s too busy falling asleep.

When she wakes up the next morning, she’s alone. Somehow he managed to get her under the covers. There’s a glass of water on her nightstand and a little folded note. She opens it.

I understand if you need some space today. Hopefully see you tomorrow. Below it there’s a word that he scribbled out, and instead put a heart with a letter A beside it. She frowns at it, squints to try to figure out what he scratched out. She can make out an I. The next word starts with an L, then an O—ah.

They've been dating less than a week and he already wants to end his notes with *I love you*. Anakin is a walking red flag. There's not a therapist in the world who would condone this relationship. She imagines her past self meeting him, dismissing him, disgusted by his kindness and affection. No, that's not right. Back then, she wouldn't have looked down on Anakin, because she wouldn't have been able to see him at all.

She's old enough to know this is all a bad idea, that she's being cruel letting him go on like this, not rebuffing him or setting clear boundaries or pulling the plug like she should have a week ago. But she's also old enough to know herself, to be honest with herself, and when she reaches inside herself to figure out what she's feeling, all she can find is joy.

Chapter 3

On Saturday, Padmé goes to pick Anakin up at his house. As she pulls into the driveway she thinks she must be in the wrong place. She was expecting something kind of rundown with a bunch of cars in the yard, but this is a little blue bungalow with a detached garage and a porch swing. There's even a flower bed out front.

She'd been planning to wait for him to come out, but she's a little early and too curious, so she gets out of the car.

The front porch is clean and there's a mat that looks like it used to say "Welcome" but now it's faded into almost nothing. The door has a pretty stained glass inlet. She rings the doorbell.

A dog barks. A second dog barks. Anakin opens the door and both dogs try to run out but he grabs their collars and drags them back. "Leave her alone, guys, come on."

One of them is a yellow lab and the other is some kind of Corgi mix. She steps inside and the Corgi sniffs eagerly at her ankles, while the yellow lab goes to hide behind the couch.

"I didn't know you had dogs," she says, squatting down to pet the Corgi, who won't let her because he's too busy sniffing her hand. Then he flops onto his side and she gives him a belly rub.

"The terrified one is C3PO. The shameless bastard is R2D2."

"Those are interesting names."

"My cousin named them when she was little."

Padmé stands and looks around. The house is small but tidy. Cozy. There's a sectional and a big TV, a sunny kitchen, a hallway leading to the bedrooms and bathroom. A fireplace sits at the far end of the room, and on the mantle is one small picture frame beside an urn. She goes over to look at the photo. It's of Anakin and his mother, Anakin aged nine or ten maybe, his mother holding him on his lap. He's grinning in that way Padmé has come to adore. His mother has tan skin and dark hair, and Padmé can't help but notice that his mother might actually be younger than her. And they look remarkably alike. The thought does not disturb her as much as it probably should.

"This is a cute picture," she says as she puts it back on the mantle.

Anakin is standing behind her now. "That was taken a few years before she got sick."

"She looks so young."

"She was forty-one when she died."

A mild wave of nausea hits her. What a tragedy. She was Padmé's age when she got sick.

Padmé turns around, plasters on a faint smile, and says, "Yikes."

He smiles back. "Thank you for remembering."

“So do you rent this house, or...?”

“Not exactly.” He grimaces a little, and she once again feels like she said the wrong thing. “It’s my mom’s. When she married my step dad she decided to rent this place out instead of selling it. Then when she got sick it was closer to the oncologist and easier to get in and out of, so we moved back in. And she left it to me when she died, so I stayed.”

“So you live here alone,” she says.

“Most of the time. Ahsoka’s here way too much. The guest room is basically hers.”

“That’s your cousin?”

“Yeah.”

“Where do you keep all your cars?”

“At the shop. There’s a big storage shed out back.”

She looks him over. Plain black t-shirt today. Jeans without holes in them. Chuck Taylors instead of boots. He made no attempt to tame his hair and she thinks she likes that better.

He steps into her space, sweeps her hair off her shoulder. “You look beautiful today.”

“You say that every time you see me.”

“It’s always true.”

“I noticed you haven’t kissed me yet.”

“Do you want me to kiss you?”

“I always want you to kiss me.”

He leans down and presses his lips to hers. She expects him to get carried away but he keeps it light. When he pulls back he says, “I missed you.”

“It’s been one day.”

“Every moment without you is agony.”

She presses her forehead to his chest and tries very hard not to laugh, but fails.

“What’s funny about that?” he asks.

“Nothing,” she says, looking back up at him. “You’re just so dramatic.”

“I prefer to think of it as romantic.”

She reaches up and cups his face in her hands. “It is. I’m just not used to your level of sincerity.”

“Is sincerity a good thing?”

“A few years ago I would have said no, it’s a weakness to be taken advantage of, but now—I don’t know. It’s refreshing being around someone so honest and fearless.”

He ducks his head and she thinks her heart might explode. "It's weird that the things most people hate me for are the reasons you like me."

"Weird? I think it means we're well-matched."

Why does she keep making this worse?

"Permission to be cringe?" he asks.

No, she should say. Let's head out, she should say. Have some boundaries for fuck's sake, she should say.

"Granted," she says.

"Being with you is the happiest I've ever been."

"Oh, Ani..." she says as she runs her fingers through his hair and watches his eyes flutter shut.

He nudges his head into her hand like a puppy. "It's true."

"I know it is, honey, but..."

"But?"

If you keep saying things like that, it will kill me when this inevitably ends, she wants to say.

"Nothing," she says. "Let's go before we get too distracted."

She drives him one town over to an area she discovered once when she got lost. It's just a short stretch of road with shops and restaurants and a park, oddly untouched by the university, maybe because it's not gentrified. They get lunch at a little deli where they eat on the patio and talk for a long time about *Beloved* which he says "really got to him." She never has to worry about conversation; he always has something to ask or talk about, and on the few occasions there's a silence it never feels strained or uncomfortable. He never interrupts. He always asks insightful questions. He's so good at listening that she didn't realize until now how bad most people are at listening. She can say something offhand, something anyone else would forget, and he'll bring it up in a later conversation if it becomes relevant again. He may be only a year or two older than her students, but he doesn't seem like it. He has a kind of grace and self-assurance that awes her, that not even high-ranking politicians possess. Aside from his mother's death, what has he been through to make him seem so far beyond his years? Or is she only seeing what she wants to see, to make herself feel less guilty about dating someone so much younger than her?

When they're done eating, they walk next door to the used bookstore which has become her favorite in the area. (It's called Booksalot, which she finds tacky, but whatever.) The whole place is poorly organized; the books are stacked from floor to ceiling in row after row after row. There are more books than there is shelf space for them so there are little mountains of them stacked on the floor in each aisle which is definitely a fire hazard. It's nearly always empty except for the clerk, a little old lady behind the register who wears a pair of giant

headphones while she crochets. Once Padmé asked what she was listening to, and she went into extreme and graphic detail about a Finnish true crime podcast. Padmé could spend days here.

"I can't believe you brought me to a bookstore," Anakin says, following her to the vaguely named fiction section.

"If you think I'm capable of being within a one mile radius of a bookstore and not going inside, you don't know me at all."

"What are you planning to buy?"

"I'm not *planning* to buy anything. I'm going to let the books speak to me." She starts inspecting the spines. "Also I need about fifty books for comps and to restock my student shelf."

"Student shelf?"

"Every semester I buy used copies of some of my favorites and give them to students who have no idea what to write their papers on."

"Is that normal? Like something other English professors do?"

"No."

"So why do you do it?"

She shrugs. "I like getting people to read. Sometimes they'll only do it if you physically put a book in their hands. And make it worth fifty percent of their grade."

They make it to the far back corner of the store where it's darker and cooler. She's in what might be the YA section except there's also a copy of *War and Peace* next to a long line of *The Baby-Sitters Club*. She's just about to give up and try another aisle when Anakin says, "Hey, come here." When she looks up at him he presses her against the shelf and kisses her.

She lets it go on for a moment before coming to her senses, pulls away, and says, "We're in public."

"We're probably the first people to have come into this place in fifty years." He presses a little kiss to the corner of her mouth. "And don't tell me you haven't always wanted to fuck around in a bookstore."

"I—" She turns away from him, stares at the bright neon spines of dozens of Christopher Pike paperbacks.

He curls behind her back, whispers, "It's probably your ultimate fantasy to get fucked right up against the shelves."

She doesn't say anything, doesn't move, lets him slide the strap of her dress down and kiss her bare shoulder.

"You always wear these cute dresses that drive me absolutely insane," he says, hand sliding up her inner thigh. She closes her eyes. He slips his fingers between her legs. Pauses. "Are you not wearing any underwear?"

“I thought they’d get in the way,” she tries to say casually.

He moans against her shoulder, fingers her a little. It’s embarrassing how wet she gets for him.

“I have to survive this whole day knowing you’re not wearing anything beneath this sexy little dress.” He kisses behind her ear. “Can I get you off?”

“Here? Now?”

“It’ll only take a minute.”

“You don’t honestly think—” She bites back a moan as he roughly circles her clit.

“You can count down from sixty if you want.”

“You’re so arrogant.”

“Uh huh. Keep talking, sweetheart.”

“You get sixty seconds. That’s it.”

She concentrates on counting. He peppers her shoulder and neck with kisses while he does some kind of magic with his hands. By the thirty second mark, she’s trying to forcibly keep herself from coming. It’s not fair. How does he do that? She can’t even make herself come in a minute.

She loses count around ten because she’s focusing too much on not making any noise, palm clapped over her mouth, intensely grateful for the clerk’s giant headphones. It doesn’t matter, she’s coming, pulsing around his fingers and trying not to collapse.

He nips the shell of her ear. “Still think I’m arrogant?”

“I can’t stand you.”

“Could’ve done it in thirty if you’d let me tongue-fuck you.”

“No tongue-fucking me in public.”

“We’ll see how long that resolve lasts.”

She turns back to him, trying to be angry and failing, biting her tongue to keep herself from asking him to fuck her. Thankfully she’s distracted by watching him suck his fingers into his mouth. Getting off should make her less horny, but she’s beginning to realize that with Anakin, the first orgasm is only ever an amuse-bouche of what’s to follow.

He bites his lower lip. “You’re so hot when you come. I love when you get all red like that.”

She refuses to look down at what she knows will be a noticeable bulge in his pants because his jeans are always too fucking tight. Gathering up all her willpower, she manages to grit out, “*Books*,” and shove past him into the next aisle.

Padmé puts a copy of *Pale Fire* on the stack in Anakin's arms which is now almost at his chin.

"Nabokov," he says, head tilted to read the front.

"It's Nabokov. Reverse the emphasis."

"Is he Russian?"

She squats down to look at the totally misfiled Foucault. "He is, but he's an American novelist."

"So not like Dost, Dostoy—"

"Dostoevsky. And no, Nabokov is a century later, and even though he did write a bit in Russian, his most notable works are in English. Like *Lolita*. You've probably heard of that one."

"I've seen the Kubrick movie I think."

"Kubrick got it a little wrong."

"Probably why I didn't like it."

She puts *Discipline and Punish* on top of the stack which for some godforsaken reason is on her comps list. No disrespect to Foucault, it's just that it has nothing to do with her field of study. It's probably one of Dr. Kenobi's picks.

"So am I your *Lolita*?" Anakin asks.

"That depends," she says, noticing belatedly he didn't ask in a flirty way, but a serious one. "Am I so delusional and narcissistic as to be totally unaware of the immense suffering you endure in my presence?"

"But isn't that the point? That *Lolita* is just a façade and Humbert can't see who Dolores even is?"

She stands upright and looks at him. "That's pretty insightful for only watching the Kubrick adaptation."

"I also watched the Jeremy Irons one."

She shoves some books aside to find a secret row of books behind them. "Nabokov really likes unreliable narrators who try to convince you they're not monsters when they are, in fact, monsters."

"So you're saying I'm not your *Lolita*."

She turns her attention once more from the books. "What are you asking?"

"I'm asking if I'm real to you."

"I could ask you the same question. You're the one who has me on a pedestal."

"I don't have you on a pedestal. Having you on a pedestal implies I'm not aware of your flaws. And I think I have a decent idea of them."

She puts two more books on the stack in Anakin's arms. "We've only been dating for a week. How can you know my flaws?"

"I read *The Secret Garden*."

"So?"

"So, if that's the book you've re-read the most, it says a lot about who you are."

"I don't see how—"

"—a book about a girl who escapes a life of emotional neglect to find a sense of purpose and passion in a better, more loving environment has anything to do with you? You're right, no common ground there."

Well. She has nothing to say to that.

"You think you're hard to read," he says, "but you're not. You're just so intimidating and intelligent that no one's ever paid close attention to you. They're too scared of how *you* see *them*."

She opens her mouth to defend herself, but there's nothing to defend. "Are you scared of how I see you?"

"I just asked you if I'm your Lolita. Of course I am."

"You're not my Lolita. You're very, very real to me."

A moment passes between them, eyes locked on each other, and she feels a sudden sense of distortion, a fraying of the careful organization of her understanding of the universe. And she realizes this entire time she's only been seeing the tiny brushstrokes of the much larger painting that is Anakin.

They get ice cream and eat it on a park bench. Padmé got one scoop of raspberry chocolate chip. Anakin, in his hubris, got three scoops of vastly different flavors, one chocolatey, one fruity, and one disgusting combo of the two with gummy worms and Oreos in it. Nevertheless, he seems very pleased with his purchase.

She still feels a little unnerved—the girl scooping her ice cream kept staring at them, and Padmé thought she was trying to figure out what their relationship to one another was. Mother? Boss? Girlfriend? Maybe she's just being paranoid. Maybe the girl was just checking Anakin out. He's definitely hard to miss.

"So you're aware of my flaws, huh," Padmé says.

"Not, like, objective flaws, but ways our personalities might clash in the future."

"Like what?"

"Stubbornness."

She's just about to cut him off at the root when he adds, "I know you don't think you're stubborn. *Other* people think you're stubborn, but it's only because you fully inform yourself

about things and consider all angles before you form opinions. So when someone comes to you with a less informed opinion, you have no reason to pretend to listen to their perspective when you've already considered it and dismissed it a long time ago."

That's creepily accurate. "Okay, and how does that clash with you?"

"I'm stubborn because I'm an asshole who doesn't like being wrong."

"Ah."

"So when your perceived stubbornness clashes with my genuine stubbornness, there are two possible solutions. One, if you really haven't considered whatever my opinion is, I trust that you'll hear me out. Or two, I'll just shut up and listen."

"These are pretty big behavioral generalizations. Stubbornness isn't just about forming opinions. It's also about habits, world views, belief systems..."

"I know. But I'm just saying, I really respect you and I'll never dismiss your perspective because it differs from mine."

"Oh," she says, scraping the bottom of her ice cream cup. "How did you get that from *The Secret Garden*?"

"I didn't. I got it from our conversation about universal healthcare."

"But we agreed on that."

"I know, but whereas my opinion is 'free healthcare good' and informed entirely by having to deal with my mom's terrible insurance, yours is, 'here's exactly how we should implement these changes.' Just made me realize how much thought and research you put into things, and that maybe I shouldn't base all my opinions on my personal experiences."

"Your experience matters though. Your life would be completely different if you didn't have to prioritize insurance premiums and medical bills over your own education."

She inwardly cringes as soon as it comes out of her mouth. It's true, but cruel to state it so outright.

"I know," he says, giving up on his half-melted ice cream. "But it is what it is. You can only be angry for so long and destroy yourself so much before you have to get over it and move on."

Destroy yourself so much? What does that mean?

"But as interesting as it is to talk about ways we might clash," he says, "I prefer thinking about the ways we're compatible."

"And in what ways are we compatible?"

He gives her a long look and a sly smile. "You're looking for someone to worship you, and I'm looking for a god."

As they're walking down a stretch of shops, Anakin stops and backtracks to a storefront whose windows are blacked out, but there's a neon sign that says OPEN.

"Is this a sex shop?" he asks, cupping his hands around his eyes to see through the windows. "I think it's a sex shop."

And before she can say, *Hey let's not go into this extremely sketchy establishment*, he goes inside. She stays back for a moment, thinking, and decides to follow him.

It is, indeed, a sex shop. Despite what the front looked like, it's actually pretty nice inside with vibes of a library that hasn't been renovated since the nineties. As far as she can tell, the place is empty, which is good because she would be mortified to make eye contact with another person here. Anakin picks up a basket and heads straight for the giant wall of vibrators. The cashier is a girl with dyed-black hair and a face full of piercings, and doesn't bother looking up from her phone as they pass.

"Anakin," Padmé whispers, like she's not allowed to talk at full volume for some reason. "What are you doing?"

He reaches up and plucks a giant pink vibrator from the rack. It's transparent, with a bunch of ball bearings inside and unpleasant-looking spikes at the tip. "What does it look like I'm doing?" He shows the thing to her. "What about something like this? Or would you rather go full Hitachi?"

"I don't need a vibrator."

"Who says it's for you? I'll buy it for myself and if you happen to want to use it, it'll be there for you."

"I'm not going to masturb—" She glances back at the girl who is still not paying attention to them. She hisses, "I'm not going to masturbate in front of you."

"Imagine me, tied up, unable to touch you or myself. You, getting yourself off with this until I'm begging you to untie me. Maybe you do something about it. Or maybe you leave me like that the rest of the night."

She can feel her entire body rise in temperature.

"It's too big," she says. "I'd want something smaller."

He puts the vibrator back on the peg it was dangling from. "Fair. But I'm a size queen, so, you know, the bigger the better."

"A size..." She reaches a conclusion that makes her even hotter than she was before. "Have you slept with men?"

"What about me doesn't scream bisexuality to you?"

"I don't know. Small town in a red state?"

"Excuse you, we're a blue state now because of *your* campaign." He stares off into the middle distance like he's having a small epiphany. "Wow that's hot."

"Blue by eight percent, but before that—we're supposed to be talking about sex toys."

“How are you not bi? I thought you were a progressive.”

“I don’t really know, okay. I’ve been attracted to like, five people in my entire life. And one of them is Barack Obama.”

“I hope I’m another.”

She knows she’s already red and that she’s rapidly becoming an even deeper shade of it. “Yes, and I hate you for it.”

He leans down and gives her a peck on the lips. “You are so freakin’ cute.”

“Shut up.” Desperate to get out of this conversation, she points to a vibrator near the end of the wall. “I want that one.”

He slides it off the peg. “This one? It’s just a bullet. It doesn’t even have speed settings.”

“I’d rather start small and work my way up.”

He tosses it in the basket and wanders away, deeper into the store, stopping in an aisle of what appear to be restraints. “We’ll need these,” he says, plucking a pair of leather handcuffs from the shelf and tossing them in the basket. ‘And this.’ A bundle of silk rope. He hesitates, and puts a second bundle in the basket. “Can never have too much rope.”

He moves on and stops at a truly overwhelming array of lubricants. “How do you feel about flavored lube?”

“It sounds like a UTI waiting to happen.”

“Basics then.” He drops a thing of lube into the basket. Is it for her? She’s always so wet for him. Should she be offended?

Next he reaches a rotating display of small things that look like spades in a deck of cards. He picks up one made of black rubber that has a ring on the bottom. “Butt plugs?”

She feels so stupid for having to ask this. “For what?”

“You’re right, I’m getting ahead of myself,” he says as he puts it back. “We’ll sidebar the ass stuff for now.”

Just as he’s begun lecturing her on the appeal of tapered anal beads, something catches her eye. She wanders over to a little display of leather wearables and picks up a black collar. It’s so soft. She’s a vegetarian, tries not to buy animal products, but it feels so good in her hands.

“Find something you like?” he says close by her ear.

She turns around and shows it to him. “If we bought this, would you wear it?”

“The better question is, would I ever take it off.”

“It’s just so... you.”

“I guess since I can’t get a neck tattoo that says ‘Mommy’s little boy,’ it’ll have to do.”

A wave of heat crashes over her. She doesn’t think she’s ever been this turned on in her life, like her body can no longer contain the tension coiled within it.

She puts the collar in the basket and says, “We have to go. Right now.” He gives her a concerned look, seems about to say something, and she adds, “If I don’t fuck you in the next ten minutes, I am going to die.”

She kind of mauls him before he can even unlock his front door. He’s balancing kissing her, holding a giant bag of books and another of sex toys, and trying to get his key in the lock all at the same time. Finally he manages to get the door open and they stumble through it. He drops the bags, closes the door, and pushes her up against it, lifting her legs up to wrap around his waist.

She can hear the dogs barking outside. His mouth is ravenous.

“Say it again,” she says.

He grinds against her in a way that makes her dizzy. She can feel him smile smugly against her neck. “You like it when I call you Mommy?”

An orgasm rips through her, so surprising that she cries out more loudly than she ever has. She’s probably soaked his jeans.

“You *do* like it,” he says. “So? Does Mommy want to get fucked?”

She runs her hands through his hair and grips it in her fist, reveling in the low moan he makes in response. “Fuck me.”

“Right now?”

She nods and hears the satisfying clatter of his belt buckle, feels the blunt head of his cock fuck into her. He bites at her throat as he starts thrusting.

“Harder, baby. You feel so good.”

He groans against her neck. “Love being your baby.”

She feels delirious. He’s fucking her so hard her dress comes undone. The straps slip off her shoulders and the bodice pools around her stomach. He cups her breast, pinches and twists a nipple.

“Come on, want to feel Mommy come on my cock,” he says, and as soon as the words are out it happens again, a rushing pulse through her body that takes the breath out of her lungs. “Fuck, that’s so hot, I can’t—”

He pulls out right before he comes. He tries to catch most of it in his fist but it ends up on her dress, her chest, her chin. She doesn’t care.

After a long moment of trying to catch their breath, he gently lowers her to the ground and holds her steady until she’s found her balance.

“So,” he says. “That was a terrible fucking idea.”

"I'm pretty sure I'm clean," he says, pacing back and forth. They've made it to his bedroom where she promptly collapsed on his bed. "Are you on the pill?"

She shakes her head.

"Ninety-nine percent sure I'm clean. Ninety-five. I should go get you some Plan B."

She loves his bedroom. It's not the angry teen boy room she was expecting, covered with posters of bands and naked women. The bed is enormous, made neatly, and the bedspread is just a plain blue. His closet is organized. He has two dressers and two nightstands, a set. The kind you'd see on Maui twenty years ago, that whitish-pinkish wood. Matching curtains with palm fronds on them, clearly his mother's attempt at a theme. The only clutter is on the tallest dresser—a pack of cigarettes beneath an orange Bic lighter, a handful of dusty pocket change, some washers and bolts and screws. An intimidating-looking wrench. An alarm clock older than he is. Only one of the nightstands has condensation rings.

"Ani," she says, holding her arms up. "Come here, baby."

He lies down beside her and lets her hold him. She feels the tension in her body unwind.

"You're not worried?" he asks.

"I should be, but I'm not."

"You're not mad at me?"

"No, honey. You did what I told you to. I got carried away."

He nuzzles against her chest. "I swear I'm clean. I got tested, uh. I don't know, a few months ago. And I don't think I slept with anyone after that."

"You don't think?"

"Yeah, no, I'm sure. There was that girl I dated while I was trying to convince myself to stop having a crush on you, and I got tested after that, so. Yeah. Clean."

She kisses his forehead. "I believe you."

He looks up at her. "And if I ever get you pregnant, if you don't want to get an abortion I swear I'll be the best dad in the world."

"I'll put that on a coffee cup for you."

He leans up on his elbow. "Hey, how many kids do you want? One, two, seven?"

She plays with his hair. "Two maybe."

"Two sounds good."

"Do you already have our children's names picked out?"

"We've been dating a *week*, Padmé," he says. "Of course I do."

She laughs and he says, "I'm kidding, I swear. But, you know, I really like the name Luke."

"Luke. That's a good name. What if it's a girl?"

"I don't have a girl name picked out."

"I've always liked Leia."

His face lights up at that. "Love it. Okay, so seven days into our relationship we have our kids' names picked out. I think things are going pretty great."

"Yeah," she says, unable to stop smiling, "they are."

They order pizza and watch something vaguely interesting on Netflix that she's not paying attention to. Anakin lays his head in her lap and she runs her fingers through his hair, marveling at how soft it is, like a baby's, how calm and quiet he can be when he's focused. She traces the shell of his ear with the tip of her finger, memorizes the straight angle of his nose, the curve of his lower lip.

He rolls onto his back and looks up at her. "You're paying more attention to me than the show."

She presses her thumb against his lip just to feel how soft it is. "You're more interesting to me."

"What else were you planning for today?"

The plans, of course, were shot the moment they walked into the house. Padmé's dress is in the washing machine and she's left wearing only one of Anakin's t-shirts.

"I thought we would go on a hike," she says. "Then we would get something to eat. Then I was going to take you to a drive-in movie."

"A drive-in, you say."

"They're playing *The Godfather*. I thought you might like it."

"That sounds like a movie I should probably pay attention to, and I don't think I would have been able to."

"Another time then."

"Maybe we could go on a hike tomorrow. I mean, if you're planning to stay the night."

"Am I invited to? Your cousin won't be here?"

"Hm. You make a good point." He pulls his phone out and texts Ahsoka. A second later it vibrates. "She says, 'I'd rather die than walk in on you and Madam President.'" He looks up at her. "She calls you Madam President. Because of the—"

"Yeah, I get it."

"Wait, you said you were attracted to Obama. Do you *know* Obama? Oh my god, did you sleep with Obama?"

"Of course I didn't sleep with him, he's married."

“Your reasoning isn’t ‘he was the President of the United States for eight years’ but ‘he’s married.’ What the fuck, Padmé.”

“I wouldn’t say we’re friends or anything, but if we ran into each other we’d probably stop and chat for a bit.”

“You would stop and chat. With Barack Obama.”

“Michelle sent me a nice card when I quit my job.”

“Of course she did. Of course former First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama sent you a nice card.”

“It’s really not a big deal.”

“It’s a big deal for a guy with no education who’s never been out of Ohio.” He presses his palms into his eyes. “Christ, why are you even with me? I don’t deserve to be on the same planet as you, let alone on the same couch while you stroke my hair like some kind of angel.”

She continues stroking his hair. You couldn’t pay her to stop. “Do you want some logical justification or is it enough to say that I’m happy when I’m around you? That I enjoy talking to you and spending time with you? That you’re the sweetest, kindest boy I’ve ever met?”

He rolls onto his side, face pressed against her belly. Muffled, he says, “You’re going to make me cry.”

“I wish I could share just one day of my old life with you so you can see how awful it was and how special you are.”

“If you don’t want me to be even more in love with you then you have to stop talking.”

“What if I want you to be more in love with me?”

He groans into her stomach. “That’s a lethal dose. I wouldn’t make it.” He rolls onto his back again. “I know I’ve been doing a terrible job playing it cool, but I love you so fucking much I just can’t be a rational person around you.”

An acute twisting sensation in her chest. There’s something wrong with her that she can’t seem to tell him to back off a little. In fact she’s spent the entire day doing the exact opposite. The entire week.

She lightly wraps her hand around his throat, feels the rapid beat of his pulse against her palm. “Say it again.”

“I love you,” he says.

“Again.”

“I love you.” He holds her wrist, not to move her hand from his throat, but secure it there. She’s almost worried by how fast his heart is beating. “I don’t ask for much, but I want to be allowed to tell you how I feel. It’s fine you’re falling slower than I am, but it’s killing me not telling you how much you mean to me.”

“You’ve been telling me all day.”

"I know, and I feel bad about it because I promised I'd back off. I really want to be good for you, Padmé. I want to be your boyfriend."

"Okay," she says, feeling even more delirious, like she's on some kind of drug, like this is a fever dream, "you can be my boyfriend."

"And that means we're exclusive? We agree not to see other people?"

"I don't think there's a chance of that happening anyway, but yes."

He closes his eyes and exhales like a great weight has been lifted from him. "It should be illegal to be this happy."

"We should probably talk about this first," he says. "Set some ground rules."

She tugs up the hem of his shirt and he obediently lifts his arms so she can pull it off him. "Why?"

They're in his bedroom, their bag of new toys waiting patiently on his dresser. She's so comfortable here. It's so much warmer than her apartment: a brand new building, cheaply made, with no personality to speak of. This house is a home. It has history. She's not sure she's ever lived in a place like this.

"That's just kind of what you do in these situations," he says.

"Okay, like what?"

"I don't know, should I have a safeword?"

She runs her hands over his stomach, kisses his chest. "Why would you need a safeword?"

"In case I need to tell you to stop what you're doing."

"Why can't you just tell me to stop?"

He thinks about that a moment. "Okay, sure. That works for now."

"What else?"

"Uh, well you know how so far I've had pretty good stamina? That is not at all going to be the case when I'm submitting to you."

Submitting to you. She likes that phrase very much.

"I'll try not to come without permission," he says, "but if I do..."

"I'll punish you?"

He gives her a devious, sexy little smile. "Yes please."

"What else do I need to know?" she asks.

"You can hurt me as much as you want. Mark me up, whatever. Humiliation, degradation, spitting on me, that's all good."

She pulls at his belt, unbuckles it. "It might take me a while to work up to all that."

"What about you? Is there anything I should know?"

She unbuttons and unzips his pants. "I don't know, I'm still figuring things out."

"You want me to keep calling you Mommy, or is that for special occasions?"

"*Fuck*," she breathes, and presses her head against his chest, sinks her nails into his back as she tries to calm the sudden inferno her body becomes at that word.

He hisses in through his teeth. "Okay, deploying the Mommy stuff carefully then."

"Is it weird that I'm so into that? Or gross?"

"Well, yeah, but that's what makes it hot. And no matter how into it you are, I'm into it like, three times as much. I mean..." He takes her hand and brings it to his cock, which is already hard.

"If there's anything else we need to talk about," she says, feeling him pulse against her palm, "we can do it while I'm fucking you."

"Yes, Mommy."

She makes a sound like she's been punched in the stomach.

"Okay, okay, sorry," he says. "Ma'am? Is ma'am less destructive?"

She nods.

"Hey," he says, tilting her chin up. "Don't push yourself, okay? The only thing I'm patient about is sex. So take your time."

"I will."

He leans down and presses a soft kiss to her lips. "I love you."

"Take off your pants and get on your knees."

Another wicked smile. "Yes, ma'am."

She secures the buckle and steps back to inspect her work. "How is that?"

He tugs the collar. "Good."

She runs her hands through his hair as he looks up from his position on the floor, politely waiting to be told what to do. She loves the image of him naked, collared, a kind of desperate longing on his face.

"You're so beautiful," she says. "I could look at you forever."

He bites his lip and strokes his cock.

"No touching yourself, baby," she tells him. "Only I get to touch you."

He puts his hand back on his thigh. "Yes, ma'am."

“You like it when I’m nice to you?” she asks.

He nods.

She thought it would be more difficult than this, but for some reason she knows exactly what to do and say. Anakin’s eagerness and assurances and affection have made it all so easy.

“You’re such a good boy for me,” she says. “You make me so happy. Here, give me your hand.”

He lifts his hand and she takes it by the wrist, palm up, guides it between her legs. Immediately he sinks his middle finger into her.

“Feel how wet you make me?” she asks.

She watches the collar move as his throat bobs with a swallow. “Yes, ma’am.”

She lifts her foot up onto the bed which is relatively low to the ground. She’s still wearing his t-shirt, pulls it up a little so he can see. “Come here. Show Mommy what your mouth can do.”

“Oh fuck,” he says softly, still gently fingering her, his forehead resting against her thigh as he tries to regain his composure. Once he does, he leans up and starts tonguing her clit. He slips a second finger in and she rides his face, his hair pulled into her fist. With his free hand he keeps moving to stroke his cock but stops himself.

Her entire body shudders when she comes. He moans against her cunt as she grinds onto his face, legs suddenly weakening. She tugs his hair to get him to stop and when he pulls away he has this calm, dreamy expression on his face. His cock is so hard it’s reddened now, and she can see come leaking out the tip, dribbling down.

She bends down and kisses him, tastes herself on his mouth. “You’re so good at that, baby.”

“Thank you,” he says.

“Are you doing okay, honey?”

“Very okay.”

“You’re so sweet like this,” she says, scratching behind his ears. “I want you to go lie down on the bed now, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As he gets up to go lie on the bed, she roots through their bag of toys and takes out the leather cuffs. When she returns to him, she says, “Arms up.”

He lifts his arms over his head. She secures the cuff around one wrist, wraps the chain around a post in the headboard, and secures the other wrist.

He looks up at his own hands worryingly. “I don’t want to break the bed.”

“Then don’t break the bed.”

“You underestimate my need to touch you.”

She presses a kiss to his lips. "Deal with it."

"Yes, ma'am."

Now that she has him collared and restrained, she can finally take her time with him without worrying he's going to focus totally on her. She kneels between his legs. First she uses the opportunity just to look at him, to run her hand down his firm chest and soft stomach, toned thighs and the dusting of light hair on his legs. His kneecaps are cute. How can someone's kneecaps be cute?

Surprisingly, it's only his arms that are tattooed. The rest of his body is blank.

She runs the tip of her finger lightly up his cock. His perfect cock. Perfect size, perfect shape. It jumps at her touch. She leans down and licks the tip, tastes his bitter precome.

"You don't have to do that," he says.

She wraps her hand around it and strokes it slowly. "I want to. I've never done it before. I used to think it was degrading."

"And it's not anymore?"

"Not when it's you."

She sucks the tip into her mouth. His head falls back onto the pillow and he moans. She lifts off, strokes him a little more, then takes him fully into her mouth. Her jaw stretches uncomfortably around him. In proportion to his body, he doesn't seem so big, but in her mouth and fist and cunt he's enormous.

It pulses against her tongue and he says, strained, "Going to come."

She lifts off, keeps stroking him. "I've barely started."

"Well you're really fucking good at it."

She's a little more gentle after that, slower, doesn't really suck him, just strokes and licks him. He tries to look at her every once in a while, but he seems to get overwhelmed and has to close his eyes and turn his head, take deep, even breaths.

"Baby," she says, dragging her lower lip over the tip of his cock. He makes a punched-out sound. "Do you want me to ride you now?"

"Yes. Please yes."

She climbs up his body and straddles his hips, rocks against him until she's worked herself back up.

"Should I come like this? Just rubbing against you? Using your body like a toy?"

"Use me. Use my cock. Let me be your toy."

Feeling his body under her hands, looking at him all collared and tied up, it doesn't take long for her to climb up and crash over. She curls over him, shuddering as she comes, forehead on his chest, waiting for the waves to subside.

Finally she catches her breath, sits upright, grabs him at the base.

“The condoms are—” He nods to a bedside table drawer.

“Okay,” she says while lining up his cock and sinking onto it.

“Oh *fuck*. We should really—”

She settles all the way down and stays there. “What, you don’t like to gamble?”

“Padmé.”

She leans over him, grabs his chin in her hand as she fucks herself onto him. “It’s Mommy or ma’am. Are you telling me to stop?”

He squeezes his eyes shut in a nearly pained expression. “No, Mommy.”

“Doesn’t it feel good, the thought of fucking a baby into me? Isn’t that what you want? My belly round and full with your child.”

“More than anything.”

She tilts his head to the side, nips at his earlobe. “Do you want to come inside Mommy?”

He makes a broken sound in his throat. “Yes. Please. God, please.”

“No one’s ever come in me before,” she says, pressing a kiss above his collar, right at his thudding pulse. ‘You’d be the first.’ She kisses the corner of his mouth. “The only.”

His whole body is tense, trembling, his wrists pulling at the restraints so hard his hands have turned red. Eventually she doesn’t have to move anymore; he fucks up into her with so much force that she has to steady herself against the headboard. She’s shocked by how long he can last like that, right at the edge.

“I’m gonna come,” he says. “Fuck, I’m gonna come.”

“I don’t hear a question.”

His breathing is ragged. “Please. Please can I come?”

“Yes, baby.”

Within seconds he’s coming, head thrown back, eyes squeezed shut, crying out so loudly that if she were his neighbor, she’d be tempted to check on him. His hands are wrapped around the bedpost and she hears a loud cracking sound as it splinters away.

She lets herself take a few breaths, gulp down air, feel him soften inside her. He says, “Let me see.”

She lifts off his cock and pulls up the hem of her shirt. It takes a moment, but his come drips out of her onto his stomach.

“Jesus fucking christ,” he says, ragged.

“You like that?”

“I’m never going to masturbate thinking about anything else for the rest of my life.”

Her legs feel watery and weak but she manages to climb off him and clean him up with a tissue. She unlocks his cuffs. He lowers his arms and sits up, looking dazed. She kisses his

temple. “You okay, baby?”

He exhales a “yeah.”

“You were so good for me.”

He leans against her. “I told you I’d break the headboard.”

“It’s okay. We can buy a new one.” She looks at the damage. “A sturdier one.”

He waves his hand. His wrists are chafed red. “Cheap IKEA shit anyway.”

“You’re going to have to walk me through what to do next, honey.”

“Oh, uh. I don’t even know. Will you hold me for a little bit? Kiss me?”

“Of course, baby.”

They lie down together and she holds him, kisses him softly, scratches his head, reminds him what a good boy he’s been.

“Can’t believe I came in you,” he says.

“That was maybe unwise of me.”

“Yeah no shit.”

“I loved it though.”

“Fuck, me too. I know it’s probably stating the obvious, but our chemistry is insane. I feel like I’ve done everything there is to do with anyone who’d do me, and it’s never been like this.”

“I’m glad it’s not just me.”

“No. I’m a stellar lay but this has just been off the charts. When you told me you weren’t very experienced I thought you’d be a pillow princess for a while until you figured things out, and I was cool with that, but damn. You went from zero to sixty in half a second.”

“I can’t take all the credit. You’ve made it so easy for me.”

“Christ. You’ve ruined me. I’m never going to want anyone else. Not knowing this is the gold standard. I could get hard again just thinking about it.”

“Honey,” she says, pressing a kiss to the tip of his nose, his lips, “do you mind if I...”

“Oh. Yeah, no, go for it. I’m good.”

She goes to the bathroom to get the rest of his come out of her. In retrospect, that was absolutely without a doubt a terrible idea and she can’t believe she did it. By all means she should be freaking out right now, but she still somehow isn’t. Part of her brain is telling her she doesn’t have enough money to have a baby, doesn’t have enough time, doesn’t have enough stability. But part of her brain, the total freak part of her brain, is telling her she wants a baby. Specifically, she wants a baby with a beautiful boy who’s irrationally in love with her.

When she returns, he’s pulling on a pair of jeans.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Going to buy you some Plan B.”

“I can get it.”

“Wearing what clothes?”

She looks down at herself. “Right. Why do you have to do it right now?”

“Uh, it’s kind of urgent?” He stands to button and zip his pants. Then he picks up a t-shirt from the floor and puts it on. “You want snacks? I want snacks.”

She comes up to him and unbuckles his collar.

“Shit,” he says, “I forgot about that.”

She slips the collar off, holds it in both hands like it’s precious. Already she misses the sight of it on his neck. “Pretzels. And something chocolatey.”

“Chocolate-covered pretzels?”

“Yeah, those.”

Even though things still feel heavy between them, Anakin says, “I can’t wait to have all your snack preferences memorized.”

She looks at the collar in her hands. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I keep giving you mixed messages. I tell you to reel yourself in and then I reel you back out. I say I’m not ready to get serious and then get carried away with you.”

He tilts her head up. “Look, it’s okay to feel conflicted. There’s no denying this relationship is weird, and I’m probably not the kind of person you ever imagined yourself with. We’re not matched in age, social status, or education, but when it comes down to it, I think we’re both getting the same thing out of this relationship.”

“What is that?”

“Hope.” He holds her chin and kisses her, rests his forehead against hers. “Neither of us have been able to live the life we want, and we’re offering each other a path to something better.”

It’s true. It’s so true it feels as if it’s shattered her. Something better. Her entire life, better meant stronger, more independent, more successful. Do the greatest good at all costs. But maybe better means being less of the person she wants to be and more of the person she is. The problem with their relationship isn’t that it’s too much too soon, she thinks, it’s that Anakin sees her for who she is, and loves the parts of her she’s always been afraid to look at.

Padmé wakes up the next morning alone in bed. Her dress is hanging up on a hook on the door and it feels good to get dressed again in real clothes. And she’s glad for it, because when she comes out of the bedroom, there’s a girl with two long braids about to go into the bedroom across the hall.

“Good morning, Madam President,” Ahsoka says with a curt nod, and closes the door behind her.

“Uh, hi?” Padmé says to the door.

In the kitchen, Padmé finds Anakin cooking up a truly overwhelming amount of stuff, wearing only a pair of boxers with spaceships on them. There are faint red lines down his back and around his wrists. The dogs sit anxiously at his feet waiting for him to drop something.

“Yes, that was Ahsoka,” he says without turning away from the stove, “and no, she will never call you by name for as long as you live.”

“What are you making?”

“I wasn’t sure what you’d be in the mood for, so there’s scrambled eggs, vegan sausage, vegan bacon, whole grain toast, hash browns, home fries, bagels, pancakes, I don’t have a waffle maker but—why are you laughing?”

She takes a seat at the kitchen table. “You’re just very you.”

“I’m the *most* me.” He leans down and kisses her forehead. “Get a plate. Anything you don’t eat, Ahsoka will inhale later.”

He’s a surprisingly good cook, or at least, better than she expected. Then again, if his mother was too sick to cook, he would have had to learn. This time Padmé waits until they’re done eating to bring up the difficult topic. “Do you think we should talk?”

“You’re going to give me a complex if we always have bummer conversations the morning after great sex.”

“I just want to be on the same page.”

He stands and takes his plate and hers. “Let’s at least take this outside. These walls are paper thin and I’d rather not have Ahsoka know that I call you M—you know.”

She helps him wash the dishes and put away the leftovers. They sit out on the back porch which is just a square of concrete and some chairs, a table between them with a very used-looking ashtray on it. It’s not fancy, but his backyard is well-tended like the rest of the house. R2D2 is chasing C3PO around in circles.

“You mind?” he says, slotting a cigarette between his lips.

“That’s a good place to start.”

He has his hand cupped around his lighter. “What?”

“If we get serious, I’d like you to strongly consider quitting smoking.”

He takes the unlit cigarette out of his mouth. “Why?”

“It’s a disgusting habit and it’s terrible for your health. It’s not a dealbreaker for me but I don’t like it and I don’t want to be around it.”

He opens the pack and slides the cigarette back in. "Okay. I'll quit today."

"Really?"

"You're right, it's a bad habit. I never wanted to pick it up in the first place. But until now I haven't had enough motivation to quit."

"So why did you start?"

"It's the least of all evils."

"What does that mean?"

"It means—you know, this isn't a conversation I think we're ready to have."

"Why not?"

"Listen. There are some things about me you don't know. The kinds of things that will make you look at me differently. Maybe the kinds of things you'd want to break up with me for."

She makes an indignant sound. "How bad could it be? Were you addicted to heroin or something?"

She expects him to scoff at the idea, dismiss it as being outlandish. But he only stares at her. Doesn't smile. Doesn't say anything.

She brings a hand up to her mouth. "Oh my god, Anakin. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean—"

"It's fine."

"Is that—your tattoos. They're covering—oh my god."

"I told you you'd look at me differently."

"But. You're not still..."

He clicks on his phone to check the time. "Six hundred ninety-five days, eighteen hours, and forty minutes clean."

She lets out a long exhale. "Oh thank goodness."

"I still go to NA meetings. I see a therapist every other week. And I was in rehab for a long fucking time."

"You haven't relapsed?"

"Not once."

"Do you think you ever would?"

He gives her a long look, and not a very kind one. "You don't ask that, Padmé."

"I'm sorry. I just—"

"I get it. You're scared. You have a right to be. But I can't make any promises. If you decide you want to be with me, this is part of who I am. I can't change my past and I can't predict my future. And if you decide you don't want to be with me... let's just say I've

learned to accept the consequences of the things I've done. I'll let you go, and I won't chase you down."

They're silent for a long time, the only sound the reverberation of music coming from Ahsoka's room, the mid-morning birdsong. She keeps trying to get a grasp on what he told her but it keeps slipping away, like water through her fingers.

"I need time to think about this," she says.

"I understand."

"I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be."

She stands, glances around for her purse before realizing it's still inside, along with her keys and shoes. Her hands are shaking. "I should go."

"Let me walk you out."

Inside she gathers her things, puts on her shoes. She feels horrible. Horrible. She's not even looking at him but she knows the face he's giving her, can feel his heart breaking.

Out front, he opens the car door for her. "If you decide you want that body work done sometime, let me know."

"What?" she asks, one foot in the car.

He gestures to the bumper which is still crushed from the accident. That's the last time she was shaking like this.

"Oh," she says. "Yeah, sure. Sometime."

She gets in the car and tries to close the door, but he catches it before she can. "In case I never get to say it again, I love you."

She looks at him a long moment, lost for words like when they first met, when he flirted with her out of the blue and it shocked her into silence. He just keeps shocking her. She's never known anyone like him. He doesn't fit in any box she's ever held.

He closes the door. She turns the ignition before she can think better of it.

Chapter 4

Padmé makes it through the rest of the day in a haze. She understands now why he wasn't ready to tell her. Maybe if they'd been more established in their relationship she wouldn't have reacted the way she did. But it came right after what was probably the most intense night of her life and she was already reeling from that. The collar. The mommy stuff. *I love you.*

She just keeps thinking of what it would be like to introduce her parents to him, a drug addicted mechanic with no high school diploma thirteen years her junior. What it would be like to introduce her sister and brother-in-law. All the politicians and journalists from her old life. Her cohort. Dr. Kenobi and the rest of her dissertation committee. The *president*. She can't stand the thought of it, the way they'd look down on him. Look down on her for choosing him.

There's no one she can talk to about this. Dormé wouldn't be able to say "it's nobody's business" to this. She would tell Padmé there's just too much stacked against them, to find someone better suited for her. Someone her age. Who's as educated as she is. Who knows how to hold a fork.

Later that night her phone buzzes. She snatches it up. It's a text from an unknown number: *What did you do to him???????*

Who is this? she replies.

Ahsoka. I stole your number from his phone

Is he okay?

He's been crying all day. ALL. DAY.

She adds, *He won't eat. He won't come out of his room*

Then, *WHAT HAPPENED*

Padmé doesn't know what Ahsoka knows, and doesn't want to mention anything that might be a secret. She gets as close as she can. *He told me something about his past. I didn't react well to it.*

The drugs??

You know about that?

Who do you think called 911 when he OD'd

He overdosed?

YES he almost DIED

He didn't tell me that.

I bet there's a lot he didn't tell you!!! I bet you didn't give him a chance to tell you!!!

I need time to think about this.

Dude what is there to think about addiction is a DISEASE it's not his fault

How old are you?

19

Then I can't expect you to understand.

Do you talk to him like this?

Like what?

Like you're so much fucking better than him

Does she talk to him like that? Does she talk to everyone like that?

Ahsoka says, Idgaf if you worked for the president, you never had to take care of a sick relative when you were a kid and you never had to recover from a life threatening addiction

Padmé reads the message about a dozen times. Not only are her parents alive and well, all four of her grandparents are still alive too. The only funeral she's been to was for a professional acquaintance who had a heart attack. She had a cat growing up who died after seventeen years, and Padmé mourned his loss but ultimately accepted it because he'd lived such a long time and died peacefully when he was old. She's smoked weed twice and snorted one line of cocaine in college, and hated both so much that she decided she'd just stick to wine from then on.

She knows what it is to struggle in life, but not what it is to suffer. Not like Anakin has suffered.

Has he said anything to you? Padmé asks.

He just keeps spouting all this therapy and NA jargon about acceptance and saying he's not codependent anymore and it's okay to let people go and submit to a higher power

Ahsoka adds, **BUT HE IS INCONSOLABLE**

Then she says, Please fix this. Either take him back or put him out of his misery but don't leave him in limbo like this

I appreciate your insight and I'll consider it. Goodnight, Ahsoka.

The ellipses rise for a while, then fall, and Ahsoka doesn't reply.

Padmé rings the doorbell. It's nine in the morning. Anakin is usually up by now. He takes every other Monday off and Padmé never asked why but now she guesses it's his therapy and/or NA day. His SUV is in the driveway.

No answer. She rings the doorbell again. The dogs must be out back. Another couple minutes pass and she rings the doorbell over and over again, about twenty times. The door flies open and for a second Anakin looks furious before he realizes it's her, and his face softens.

His eyes are all puffy. His hair is a mess. She's pretty sure he's wearing yesterday's jeans.

"Hey," he says.

She holds up the McDonald's bag in her hand. "I brought you breakfast." She holds up the frappe in her other hand. "And coffee."

He eyes the drink. "You already drank some of it."

"I was thirsty. Can I come in?"

He steps aside and lets her in. In the kitchen she sets the food on the table and turns to him, her arms lifted. "Come here, baby."

He hesitates only briefly before wrapping his arms around her, burying his face in the crook of her shoulder. She feels wetness against her neck, hears him snuffle, exhale, snuffle again. He holds her so tightly it almost hurts.

"I thought I lost you," he says, muffled against her skin.

"You didn't lose me, baby. I'm right here."

"I knew I should have waited to tell you."

"I'm sorry I left. I should have stayed so we could talk. So I could understand better."

"What if I tell you everything and you leave again?"

"I won't. I promise I won't."

"Even if it's bad?"

"Have you hurt anyone?"

She can feel him shake his head. "Just myself."

Her heart breaks at the way he says that.

"Then no," she says, "I won't leave."

He pulls back, looks down and away as he wipes his face with the inside of his wrist. "I'm not codependent. I'm not. I'm intense and obsessive and I have an addictive personality, but I'm not codependent."

She rubs his upper arm. "I believe you, honey, but I don't know what that means."

"I'm trying to respect your boundaries. I really am. I just don't have any of my own yet."

"Can we sit down? How long has it been since you've eaten?"

"Breakfast yesterday."

"Okay, let's eat first and then we can talk."

He nods. "Okay."

The first thing she does when he's done with his Egg McMuffin is show him her text thread with Ahsoka.

"Wow, I didn't expect her to go to bat for me like this." He hands her phone back. "But I'm sorry she was rude to you."

"I'm glad she reached out. It gave me a different perspective."

"And I'm sorry I'm such a mess about this. If you broke up with me for any other reason I would have handled it better, but this is like, the shitty things I did years ago just keep coming back."

"Addiction is a disease," she says, which is what Ahsoka said, and what all the research she did last night kept reiterating.

"That's what they say. Took me a long time to believe it though."

"I don't want to break up with you," she says. "Like you said, you can't change your past. I can't change mine either, as much as I'd like to."

"Aren't you like, one of the most successful people on the planet?"

"To some people maybe. According to my parents, I'm a failure."

"Let me guess, they expected you to run for president."

"I think you're saying that hyperbolically, but they did, quite literally, intend for me to become president one day."

"That sounds like a lot of pressure."

"It was. But what I mean is, you and I are both recovering from decisions we made when we were younger. From veering off the paths we were given."

He smiles a little at that. Something knotted up in her chest suddenly loosens. "That's a good way to think of it."

He's so sweet she wants to cry. She can't believe she left him yesterday, can't believe how cruelly she walked away from him when he was so clearly hurting.

"I'm not codependent," he says again.

"Yes, you mentioned that."

"I *want* to be codependent. It's my instinct to be codependent. But I don't think I am anymore."

"Explain this to me like I've never had therapy."

He gives her a wary look. "Have you?"

"Not even a little."

"Okay, well, that's a conversation for a different time. So, my therapist says I had a codependent relationship with my mom, because she needed me, like literally needed me, and I wrapped my entire identity around needing to be needed by her. To be of use to somebody.

And that's one of the many, many reasons I totally derailed when she died. It was like the center of my whole world collapsed."

"And you're not that way anymore."

"I can theoretically understand that love and need are different things, yes. But I haven't fully put it into practice yet. I'm still working on the whole 'I'm still worthy of love even if I'm not being used for a specific purpose' thing."

"Do you think I use you?"

"No, I really believe you like me for who I am. Even if I never fix your car or get you off again, I think you'd still like me."

She reaches across the table and holds his hand. "I think you're an amazing person and I've really enjoyed our time together."

He ducks his head. "Please don't make me cry again."

"You're totally adequate and our time together is just okay."

"Thank you, that's much better." He pauses. "You look really beautiful today by the way."

"Are you seriously going to say that every day?"

"You put on makeup and do your hair and wear cute clothes just to see me, of course I'm going to say it."

"Right, because you definitely wouldn't tell me I'm beautiful if I didn't do all those things."

He purses his lips. "Is it a crime to tell my girlfriend how hot she is on a daily basis?"

She knows she's grinning stupidly at him but she doesn't care. "That's the first time you called me your girlfriend."

"Out loud maybe. I've been saying it in my head since you first asked me out to lunch."

"Presumptuous."

"I prefer to think of it as optimistic."

"I think we've gotten off topic." He opens his mouth to say something, but she cuts in: "If you're about to say, 'Let's have sex before we get back on topic,' I agree."

They haven't done it like this before, unhurried, lying side by side with her thigh hiked over his hip, kissing the entire time. Even though it's not as intense as it usually is, it still feels amazing, like scratching an itch you haven't been able to reach before. For once Anakin doesn't have much to say.

After, they're still tangled up in each other, their hands intertwined between them. Padmé kisses his knuckles, the back of his hand, watches him smile at her and hates herself for ever taking that smile away.

“When’s therapy?” she asks.

“Two,” he says.

“Do you like your therapist?”

“Yeah, she’s nice. Actually, no, she’s not, but that’s why I like her. She calls me out on stuff in a way that makes me listen. She’s the only reason I have any self-awareness at all.”

She thinks about that. “Yeah, I guess you are pretty self-aware. I hadn’t really noticed it before.”

“Can I say something super cringe?”

“Always.”

“Do you remember the first time you came into the shop for an oil change?”

“When I berated you for your bad business practices and you flirted with me in response? Yes.”

“Like an hour after that, I went to therapy and told my therapist, ‘Today I met the woman I’m going to marry.’”

“You did not.”

“I did. And of course she was like, dude chill the fuck out, I mean not in those words, and I was like, yeah you’re right maybe that’s too far. But then I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I couldn’t wait to see you again.”

“How did you know I’d come back?”

“I gave you a forty-dollar oil change. Of course you were going to come back.”

“How much would an oil change actually cost?”

“Seventy. Your car uses synthetic oil.”

Now that she thinks about it, she only paid two hundred dollars for her tires, a number that shocked her at the time but that she didn’t question. “How much should my tires have been?”

“Five hundred-ish.”

She lifts up onto her elbow. “Anakin!”

“Don’t ask me about the work I did after your accident. You don’t want to know.”

“And you did all that because it was love at first sight for you.”

“It wasn’t love at first sight. It was love at first sight delayed by ten minutes. When I first saw you my brain turned into TV static. It wasn’t like, oh my god that lady’s hot. It was, this is literally the most beautiful human being in the world standing right in front of me, I feel like I should be praying to her or something. It wasn’t until I got to your car that it really landed for me.”

“What was special about my car?”

“You had this tote bag in the backseat. It was full of books. And normally when people have shit in their car I leave it alone. But I was really curious, and I looked in it and found this, like, really tattered notebook.”

She has absolutely no recollection of that.

“I felt bad about looking through it at first,” he says, “but then I couldn’t read a word of it anyway because your handwriting is just... I mean, illegible is putting it nicely. But it wasn’t your handwriting that got to me. It was the fact that from the inside of the front cover all the way to both sides of the back cover, you’d filled it. Like every inch of it, margins and everything. There was absolutely no logic or order to it. Some pages you’d written sideways. And I thought, what kind of psychopath writes like this.”

She frowns, can’t remember that specific notebook but it sounds like it might have been class notes or lesson plans. She does tend to treat her notebooks that way. “It’s not that weird.”

“Just look at yourself from the outside for a second. Mid-thirties woman, extremely put-together, wearing shoes more expensive than anything I own. But she drives like, no offense, but a kind of shitty car, keeps Marquis de Sade paperbacks in the backseat, and her notebook looks like a math chalkboard in a movie right before the eureka moment.”

“There are definitely nicer ways you could have said that.”

“My point is, I was obsessed. Your notebook was like, a visual representation of my personality. And I thought, you know, if who you were on the inside was like that notebook, then we’d be perfect for each other.”

“Let me make sure I understand this. You looked through my notebook, thought ‘this bitch crazy,’ and decided you were in love with me.”

“Literally yes.”

“And then you waited nearly a year to make a move.”

“I made a move as soon as I was done with your oil change. I invited you to come back and told you your tires might kill you.”

“That wasn’t a lie was it? I really did need new tires?”

“Your tires were so worn out, you shouldn’t have even bought the car. It’s probably worth less than the tires I put on it.”

“I used to drive a Benz, you know. Having a shitty car is new to me.”

“The second time you came in,” he says, “I asked you for book recs, and you remembered my name and I thought I was going to die. And then the third time you came in you’d had your accident and when I saw you all shaken up like that, I was seriously ready to go kill someone.”

“Good to know you were ready to murder for me so early in our relationship.”

“I think you’re kidding, but I’m dead serious. If someone ever hurts you, like actual malicious intent hurts you, I’ll kill them.”

“Some asshole ran a red light. There was no malicious intent.”

“Hence no murder.”

Possibly she should find his willingness to kill on her behalf concerning, but like nearly every other weird intense thing about him, she only thinks it’s hot. She’s beginning to understand the conclusions he drew about her notebook.

“I really didn’t intend for fixing your car to be a move,” he says. ‘You were just so upset, and it sounded like you had a really bad semester, and renting a car absolutely sucks, so I thought, I’ll just get this done tonight and bring it back to her before she wakes up. I promise I had no ulterior motive. I wasn’t even going to mention it. And then when you asked me out to lunch, I wasn’t going to make a move then either because, you know, you were just being nice. But then you kept looking at me like you wanted to wreck me, and I was like, oh my god she might like me back.’ He shrugs. “And I shot my shot.”

“I’m glad you did. No one’s ever pursued me before.”

“I’m sure they have, you probably just didn’t notice. I figured out pretty early on you’re one of those people who’s in their own head all the time and you have to be kind of obnoxious to get their attention.”

“Ah, that explains the obnoxiousness.”

“And then I gave you my number but you didn’t text me, so I figured I’d freaked you out, and I was kicking myself for it, but then you came back and I was like, oh my god yes. But then it was just for car stuff and I was like, oh my god no. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect you to fucking kidnap me just to make out with me. Weirdest possible move you could have made, by the way.”

“Thank you.”

It’s hard to believe that was just earlier this month. It feels like she’s been with him forever.

“I was paying such close attention to you for so long,” he says, “when you hit me with the mommy stuff I thought I’d been sucker punched into another dimension. Like it never once occurred to me that you were paying attention to me too. And I’ve just been terrified for you to learn about the drug stuff. Because it’s like, there’s this part of you that’s a total freak like me, and then there’s this other part of you that has this rigidity, like you force yourself into uncomfortable shapes to fit the place you’re in. And I really think that part of you is disgusted by me for not being able to fit the same way.”

It’s like ice water being thrown on her face. “Oh, baby, no. I’m not disgusted by you. I promise.”

“It’s okay. I can’t control what you think of me. All I can do is be my best self and hope you’ll love me back one day.”

“Oh, honey,” she says, and runs her hands through his hair, kisses him. “I think you’re wonderful. I really do. And when you’re ready to talk to me about...”

“The drug stuff.”

“That, yes. When you’re ready to talk about it, I’ll listen.”

He nudges his head beneath her chin, holds her closer. She scratches behind his ear and kisses the top of his head, thinking about all the ways she forces herself into uncomfortable shapes.

Around one, she gets dressed to leave but only makes it to the front door before he’s kissing her again, fiercely like they haven’t just spent several hours in bed together. Her lips still feel bruised and sore. He hasn’t shaved and his stubble rubs her mouth raw. She doesn’t care.

“I love you,” he says, forehead pressed against hers, hand cradling her the side of her neck while his thumb skates over her jaw. “Do I say that too much?”

“You can say it as much as you want.”

“I love you.” Another kiss, this one slow, a little desperate, like if his mouth gets too close to hers, he can’t help it. ‘I love you.’ Another kiss, lighter, a goodbye for now. “I love you.”

Eventually they manage to pull back from one another and try vainly to return to planet earth. Padmé steps out onto the porch, a good two feet away from him so she won’t be tempted to kiss him again.

“When can I see you again?” he asks.

“Lunch tomorrow? I can bring something.”

He smiles in that boyish, beautiful way he does, and for the first time since breakfast yesterday, she feels like things are going to be okay. “I’d love that.”

She brings him lunch the next day and they keep conversation light even though things still feel heavy. There are so many discussions they still need to have, but it’s hard to be serious when he’s making her cry-laugh during a story about a guy who keeps gallon jugs of pee in the footwell of his Bronco.

Anakin comes to her apartment that night and they have sex on the couch while watching a movie. The rest of the week goes by in a similar fashion, and then it’s the weekend again. It’s *Mommy, please* again. It’s *yes, ma’am* again. It’s *be a good boy for me* again. She takes a picture of him kneeling on the floor, collared, his wrists bound between his knees. Hair messed up. Cock hard and straining. Mouth red and used. He’s looking up at her with this darkness, this hunger, like a feral animal tamed to serve.

She ties him up and rides him while pressing the vibrator to her clit, and proceeds to come more times than she thought was physically possible. Anakin grimaces, grits his teeth, takes shallow rapid breaths, entire body tense and trembling to keep himself from coming. He breaks another post in the headboard.

The next morning, she wakes him up by sleepily grinding back against him, and he ends up fucking her so hard on her hands and knees that the headboard cracks the drywall.

After, when they're in the shower together, Padmé lathering up his hair with shampoo, he says, "Our sex life is destroying my house."

They go to Target to buy a new bed frame, and while they're there they pick out nicer, more durable sheets since his cheap ones have basically been ruined. She also finds a short leather leash for his collar. On the way back, they stop at her apartment and she packs up some clothes and a toothbrush so she doesn't have to keep going home.

While Anakin is at work, she reads on the back patio and hangs out with the dogs. She has lunch with him most days. They finally get around to getting tested and they're both clean. They go grocery shopping together. They cook together. They tell themselves they're finally going to watch something they've been saying they want to watch, but they always end up having sex. Sometimes they read on opposite ends of the couch, him with a book she loves and her with a title from her comps list that nearly bores her to death, envious that he can read whatever he wants. He stops to read lines he likes out loud, thoughts he's had, observations he's made. He doesn't know it, but sometimes she only pretends to read, and secretly watches him for a long time while he's immersed, his changing expressions far more interesting than the book in her hands as she tries to guess where he is in the story.

A week later, she realizes she hasn't gotten her period in a long time. She casually puts a pregnancy test in the cart the next time they go grocery shopping. Of course he notices, picks it up, says, "You're late?"

"Plan B can make your period irregular. It's probably nothing."

She takes the pregnancy test once they get home. The fifteen minutes she waits are the longest of her life. Anakin sits on the couch holding her, kissing her temple.

"Would you hate me if I said part of me wants it to be positive?" he asks.

"Part of me wants it too," she says.

It's negative. She's sadder than she should be. A couple days later she gets her period. It's worse than usual, and Anakin goes out to buy her snacks and tampons without her even asking. She never thought she'd be with someone who would do that for her.

He wakes her up one night by shifting around, making these little sad sounds. She turns over and sees he's having a nightmare, tries to wake him up by gently shaking his shoulder. He grips her wrist. She says his name louder and he wakes up, has no idea where he is, says something about hospice, he needs to get to hospice. He comes to his senses and lets go of her wrist. Apologizes. He's drenched in cold sweat, sits there with his head in his hands trying to calm himself. She coaxes him back down and holds him. My sweet baby boy, she says. It's okay. Mommy's here.

In public, she can't help but notice people staring. They judge. They know she's doing something wrong by dating him. She feels like she's on stage all the time, performing for an audience who will never applaud.

On the Fourth of July they go out to the park and lay out a blanket and watch the fireworks, Padmé settled against his chest. It's sweltering hot and she gets a half dozen mosquito bites, but it's worth it when she sees how much he loves the fireworks.

They talk literature. They talk art. They talk politics. They talk religion. Hard conversations she's never been able to have with anyone else because not a single person in her life actually listens to her. But Anakin listens. He thinks. He does research. He'll come back days later to continue a conversation once he has a better understanding of the topic. At any given time they have about a dozen discussions going that they pick up and put down with ease. They don't argue. They don't even disagree very often. It startles Padmé to realize Anakin has become her best friend. She tells him as much, and he smiles and says, "You're my best friend too."

She nearly cries. She hasn't had a best friend in so long.

But their relationship feels like a ticking clock. She can't shake the feeling that it'll be coming to an end soon, that she'll wake up one morning and he'll decide he's gotten bored with her. That he'll get tired of waiting for her to decide she loves him. That she's too old for him and he wants to date someone his own age.

She can't shake that feeling, and yet their relationship continues growing somehow more intense. The stretches between work and lunch, lunch and coming home begin to feel like untraversable canyons of time. She doesn't remember the last time she's been to her apartment. She lets her phone stay dead on weekends. He occasionally calls her Mommy outside the bedroom, casually, like it just slips out. He finger-fucks her on a grocery run and they nearly get caught. She gives him road head and he almost crashes. They keep Gatorade stocked in the fridge at all times. They buy condoms in bulk. She starts doing research: how to be a good domme, how to make her sub happy. She writes down a list of things she wants to try. Has he ever had a prostate orgasm? No, he says. That night she fingers him and he comes untouched. She discovers she loves to rim him out. Another night she belts him until welts rise up on his ass and thighs, until he bleeds. He comes so hard afterward that she thinks he blacks out for a moment. She likes to edge him until he weeps. She likes to walk him around the house on his leash like a dog. She likes to make him kneel at her feet when she eats, hand feed him scraps from her plate. She likes watching him fall into that space where he's sweet and pliant, can barely speak. She likes taking care of him after, patching up his wounds, giving him a massage, telling him what a good boy he's been for Mommy. It sometimes takes him hours to come down. When he goes to work, he doesn't bother hiding the marks she makes on him. When she meets him for lunch she can still see them. Everyone can see them. Everyone knows where he belongs. They buy new toys—better restraints, vibrators and prostate massagers, impact play stuff, a strap-on. The first time she pegs him, it feels so good he sobs into a pillow, comes all over the sheets. She keeps asking him, Is this okay? How do you feel? Do you like this? And sometimes all he can say as he recovers is, I love you. I love you.

She still can't say it back.

They're walking the dogs one evening. C3PO has taken an intense liking to her and stays at her side the entire time, periodically looking up to see if she's still there. Anakin has been unusually quiet all day.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

He slows down so R2D2 can sniff a bush. “I’ve just been thinking. We’ve had the drug conversation tabled for a while. And as much as I hate talking about it, what I hate more is the fact you don’t have the full story, which is probably both better and worse than you think.”

The sun is setting and the sky blazes pink and orange. It’s hot but there’s a breeze at least. Fireflies flicker above the grass.

“I just don’t even know where to start,” he says.

“Would it help if I asked questions?”

“Yes, definitely.”

She thinks for a moment, and decides to ask what she’s been most curious about. “Was it just heroin?”

“No, at first it was anything anyone would sell me. Weed, coke, molly, shrooms, meth. I snorted nutmeg once when I was desperate. The only thing I didn’t touch was alcohol, I guess because at the time it was harder to get than the other stuff.”

“Alcohol was harder to get than heroin?”

“In this area, at nineteen, yeah. You can walk up to any rando in this town and ask for dope and they’d be able to point you in the right direction.”

She guesses that explains why so many of her students come to class fucked up.

“The first time I did H, it was just okay. I didn’t really get what the hype was about. But then I came down and—I mean I can’t even explain to you how bad it was. It was excruciating, physically, emotionally, mentally. In my memory, I only did it a couple times. It really didn’t seem like a big deal. But there’s all this evidence that I was on it for a while. There are just entire months gone from my memory. It was like I was taken out of my own body and someone else walked around in it for a while. Like I was just... gone.”

“Didn’t someone notice? Owen? Ahsoka?”

“Ahsoka was just a kid, so yeah, she noticed, but there was nothing she could do about it. Owen, I don’t know, all he cared about was that I was showing up to work on time. His method of grieving was just to shut everyone and everything out. His wife nearly divorced him. So as long as I wasn’t making my problems his problems, he didn’t have the bandwidth to deal with it. My step dad was worse. I think there were nearly two years I didn’t even see him. He wouldn’t come out of his house.”

“What about your friends?”

He side-eyes her. “When you drop out of high school to take care of a dying relative, you kind of stop having things in common with people your age.”

“That’s awful. I’m sorry.”

“So eventually, my problems became Owen’s problems and that’s when shit hit the fan. The creditors who were hounding me started calling the shop. Then they got his cell number. He was fielding almost as many calls as I was.”

“Creditors?”

“My mom’s health insurance had covered a lot of her treatment. Like, a lot. And I’m glad for that. But because it was covering so much, they kept jacking up the premiums, until eventually the insurance cost almost twice as much as the mortgage. Maybe if I’d been older, I would have found a better way to handle it, but I was only working part-time at the shop because I was underage, and her only income was a disability check that didn’t even cover the groceries.”

“What about your step dad?”

“He and Owen were both doing everything they could, but we were all drowning. Even if the garage was totally full all day every day, even if we raised the prices, it still wouldn’t have been enough. I spent years trying to figure out what I could have done differently, and I just don’t think there was any better path than the one I took. We were getting really desperate, and my step dad almost sold the shop. I begged him not to because, I mean, what would I do without it? I have no other skills and I didn’t graduate high school. The next nearest shop is like an hour away. So on my eighteenth birthday, I applied for as many credit cards as I could. The applications were all approved. Every single one. The limit on them was only a few thousand dollars, but I had, I don’t know, a couple dozen? It should have been illegal. And insurance companies, man, they don’t care how you pay as long as you pay. Same with hospitals. I just started charging all the bills. All of them. And I’m like, how stupid could I have been? But I just kept thinking about my mom hooked up to all this shit and the fact she’d probably die if the electric got turned off. Meanwhile I was just tanking. My mom couldn’t walk anymore and I had to carry her from room to room. Bathe her. Help her use the bathroom. I wasn’t eating. I wasn’t sleeping. I couldn’t feel anything except this like... you know when you jump in really cold water, like that shock? I just kept feeling that over and over and over again.”

Padmé stops walking and grabs his arm. “Anakin. I need to sit down.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I’m fine, I just. Need a minute.”

They sit down on a park bench. R2D2 sniffs around in the grass while C3PO lies down by her feet. The sun has sunk down beneath the horizon, crickets have begun to chirp. Padmé holds Anakin’s hand and feels a little better.

“Okay,” she says. “You can keep going.”

“Are you sure? We can table this again.”

“No, I want to know.”

He takes a deep breath like he’s getting to the hard part. “Okay, so, I racked up about twenty grand of credit card debt in a few months. It’s funny that the minimum payments all together were a total of like a hundred dollars. Nobody bugged me for a long time because I was still meeting the minimums, even though the interest was becoming about triple the principal. I wasn’t just charging the cards, I was also taking out cash advances, which have an even higher interest rate. Every other day my mom was one step forward, two steps back. She’d feel a little better one day and then a lot worse the next. That went on forever, just watching her deteriorate slowly, day after day. She was in so much pain. Like an

unfathomable amount of pain. And she was losing her mind. She just kept begging me to kill her.”

“Oh my god. Anakin.”

“I know. It was really bad for a while. Finally we got referred to hospice, and that was—I can’t tell you how grateful I am to that place. They treated her so well. They gave her better pain meds. They let me sleep in the room with her. They set me up with a grief counselor and helped me get all the house paperwork in order so it would go to me when she passed. The nurses fed me even though they weren’t supposed to. I think if I hadn’t had that experience, I’d be a different person. I’d be angrier, and cruel, and miserable, because I’d believe the world is a bad place. But any time I start to feel resentful, I remember the kindness I received there. I remember that people are good.

“That last little bit of time with her, I was happy. I know that sounds awful but it’s true. And it’s weird, I never knew you could predict death almost down to the minute. The nurses would tell me she had about a week, a few days, a few hours. I was with her at the end. I was holding her hand. I don’t think she was in any pain.

“When I got home... all I can remember is silence. No oxygen tank. No blaring TV. Every time I closed my eyes I would see her. She had Vicodin left over, so I started taking that just to help me sleep. When that ran out, I remembered a buddy of mine from high school had bought weed off this guy once, so I went to him and got a dime bag. That guy had some other stuff on him too, so I tried that. He introduced me to a different guy who introduced me to a different guy. It spiraled so quickly. And before I knew it, almost a year and a half had passed. I’d stopped paying my credit card bills. I don’t know how bad they got, I think around six figures. I was getting fifty, sixty calls a day. I started keeping my phone off, and that’s when they hounded the shop, then Owen, then my step dad. I had to come clean about the debt. They were furious. I know Owen is always threatening to fire me, but I think right then he was really going to. I mean, we didn’t have anything tying us together anymore. He’d always felt more like a coworker to me than a brother, and it would have been a load off his shoulders just to kick me and my debt and my drug habit out of his life.

“He didn’t fire me though. Eventually I started to feel too guilty for bringing them down with me and quit. Then there’s a long stretch of time I don’t remember. Then I’m in a bathtub ready to die. Then Ahsoka is there, screaming at me. Then there’s an ambulance, a hospital, detox. Then there’s rehab. When I got out, I called a lawyer and filed for bankruptcy. The lawyer recommended I walk away from the house so the bank could foreclose it, but I didn’t want to, even though I’ll never own it now. They repossessed my car at the time, my mom’s jewelry. I didn’t really have anything else of value. The whole process took forever.” Strangely he huffs a little laugh, like he just realized something. “You want to know something funny?”

She doesn’t think now is the time for funny things, but she says, “What?”

“The bankruptcy was finalized a few hours before you came into the shop for the first time. It was like that chapter in my life ended the day I met you.”

“That’s uncanny.”

“Right?”

“So what does bankruptcy actually mean? For the future.”

“I can’t apply for any loans for seven years. My credit score is going to be in the toilet the rest of my life. I’ll probably have to abandon the house eventually.”

“Okay,” she says, desperately trying to wrap her head around all this.

“Sorry your boyfriend is a deadbeat.”

“I don’t think you’re a deadbeat.”

“I just dropped a huge bomb on you. Tell me what you’re feeling.”

“I’m feeling... regret.”

“Why?”

“If I had run for office like I was supposed to, I might have been able to prevent all this from happening.”

“That’s a bit of a stretch.”

“It’s not though. I had tons of legislation drafted out. I had solid, step by step plans. They were radical but they would have at least moved the needle. I had everything mapped out, everything, and I didn’t take the road open to me.”

“You can’t stop death, sweetheart,” he says quietly, running his fingers through her hair, kissing her cheek, her jaw. “You could have done everything right, single-handedly changed this country into a socialist utopia, and my mom still would have died.”

“I don’t believe that.” Her voice cracks, turns raspy as she speaks. “She could have been more comfortable. She could have gotten better treatment. You wouldn’t have had to drop out of school, or file bankruptcy, or start using. I could have changed your life without even knowing you.”

“But if that had happened, we wouldn’t have met. And because all of this led me to you, there’s not a single thing I’d do differently.”

She looks at him, stunned. It’s darker now, and the lines of his face aren’t as clear. The light from a streetlamp is reflected in his eyes.

“You can’t mean that,” she says.

“I do.” He smiles at her like this is all okay, like even though his past has been littered with tragedy, he has nothing but hope for the future to come. “I walked through hell to get to you, and I’d walk through hell again.”

Padmé opens her mailbox to find ads and bills so stuffed in there she can barely get them out. There’s a little yellow note that says she can find the rest of her mail at the post office and to please remember to check her mailbox more often. It seems impossible to have gotten so much in such a short time, but now that she thinks about it, she hasn’t been back to her apartment in over a month.

Her refrigerator is going to be disgusting. How did she let this happen?

She tosses the mail on the table and sinks onto the couch to listen to her neglected voicemails.

One from her mother, three from Dormé with increasing urgency, and one from Dr. Kenobi.

Dr. Kenobi's says, "Hello, Padmé. I hope you're having a good summer. I sent you an email but you're probably not checking your inbox, so I was calling to see if you'd like to do brunch sometime like we talked about. Anyway, no rush. Give me a call back when you're available."

She checks the date of the call. Over a week ago. Shit. Number one rule of grad school: don't ignore your dissertation advisor. At the end of last semester, they were both so busy that their scheduled advising sessions kept getting pushed back. Padmé told him they could meet up over summer since she would be staying in town. It was her responsibility to follow up on it and she didn't, so Dr. Kenobi, being obnoxiously good at his job, did it for her.

Before she can make it through Dormé's second message— "It's *extremely important*, Padmé. Call me the fuck back."—Anakin texts her, *I miss you already*

She's about to respond but stops herself. Anakin doesn't need a hundred percent of her attention every minute of every day. She finally calls Dormé back.

"You *dick*," Dormé says instead of hello. "What is wrong with you? Have you been in the hospital or something?"

"I've been busy."

"With what? It's summer."

"Studying for comps. Working on my dissertation."

"Fucking your mechanic."

"What could possibly be so important that you had to call me *three times* instead of just texting me?"

"I'm pregnant."

Oh.

"It's a boy," Dormé adds.

"When are you due?"

"January."

She refuses to be jealous. Refuses.

"Congratulations?"

"Why is that a question?"

"I don't know, you're in med school, is having a baby right now a good thing?"

“Of course a baby is a good thing! We’ve been wanting another one for years, which you would know if you’d pull your head out of your ass for ten seconds to look around at the world.”

Normally Padmé would defend herself, but Dormé has a point. Padmé has been checked out for as long as she can remember. She was so deep in her old job that she missed the birth of Dormé’s last baby, ended up sending a box of newborn diapers months after Marie had grown out of them. Part of the reason Padmé quit her old career was so that she could be more present. Communicate with her family more. Catch up with old friends, make new ones. But she hasn’t done any of that. Instead she’s buried herself in schoolwork to the same intense degree she’s buried herself into everything else. And now she’s buried in Anakin.

“I’m sorry,” Padmé says.

After a moment, Dormé sighs, says, “It’s okay. I’m just glad you called me back.”

“Have there been any complications?”

Dormé jumps on the opportunity to discuss medical stuff—no complications thankfully, but she does enjoy talking about complications that *could* arise, because she’s a morbid weirdo—and they end up chatting for an hour before Marie wakes up from her nap and she has to go.

Padmé hovers over Dr. Kenobi’s number, but she doesn’t end up calling.

Later that day, her cohort’s group chat becomes active again as people make their way back into town. She usually ignores it because it’s mostly overexcited MFAs, and even though there’s a wide range of ages in her program, she still feels very old around them. Not to mention she’s only one of three lit PhDs in her year, and as much as she loved her master’s program—those refreshing first two years away from her old career when anything seemed possible—the doctorate has mostly been a slog. A lonely, tedious slog.

She skims through the thread. Memes, inside jokes she doesn’t understand, and then Mark the experimentalist poet pitches starting up weekly trivia a little early this semester, the one event Padmé has reliably attended since arriving here. Trivia is very lowkey—sometimes people bring their partners, friends from other departments. They secure a big table and have a lot of fun coming up with team names. If she shows up, hey great there’s someone to answer all the political questions. If she doesn’t, no one thinks anything of it.

She texts Anakin, *I’m going out tonight with some of my cohort*. And even that feels a little ridiculous, checking in with him just to go out.

Want me to come?

She hesitates for a long time. *Sorry, it’s just English department people.*

Ok, he says with the grinning face emoji. *Have fun*, and a heart.

That’s it? No sobbing emoji or begging her to come over to his place instead? She waits to see if he texts something else, but nothing comes.

Trivia is fine. It's nice getting caught up with people. Everyone keeps asking what she did over the summer and she tells them she's been studying for comps—a safe and respectable answer. They ask what she's teaching this semester, and she says she doesn't know, she hasn't checked, which is a decidedly less safe and respectable answer.

Conversation dies down once the emcee starts throwing out questions. He's a paunchy middle-aged guy named Danny who doesn't have enough charisma to be an emcee. It's hard to pay attention. She keeps thinking about how she's not allowed to look at her phone without getting them disqualified, how Anakin may have texted and she won't be able to text back. She thinks also about how many questions they're getting wrong and how Anakin gets nearly every question right when they watch *Jeopardy!* Anakin would know the answer to this, she thinks over and over again. But he's not here. Because she didn't invite him.

She's jarred from her thoughts by raucous laughter at her table. Mark the experimentalist poet slides the slip of paper and pencil over to her.

"What?" she asks.

"The question was, 'Name the campaign manager for the most recent presidential election, Democrat or Republican party.'"

"You're fucking kidding me," she says. It's the bonus question, which is always something obscure.

Mark shouts to Danny, "She's right here!"

"Oh my god," she says, covering her face with her hands.

Before she knows it, Danny has come over to their table and asks, "Is that true?"

He puts the mic in front of her face. "Unfortunately."

"Prove it," he says.

"I'm not going to prove it, just look me up."

Around the bar, she watches people get out their phones and look up the answer, which is definitely against the rules, but also a trivia participant has never been the answer to a question before.

"Wow," Danny says, holding his phone up by her face. "That's you. What the hell are you doing here?"

"That's none of your business," she says pleasantly into the mic. A few people laugh.

"Running away from politics, huh?"

"You would too if you worked the last election." More laughter.

"I heard the election was rigged. Can you confirm that?"

"Is that what a white supremacy Twitter account told you? That's a great place to get the news. Almost as reliable as FOX."

Her friends are rolling in laughter. She can take care of herself, but she wonders what Anakin would have done in this situation. Let her handle it, or tell the guy to back off. What

would he do if she went up to the bar and someone grabbed her ass? Punches would fly. If someone tried to slip something into her drink? Anakin would drag the guy out and beat him to death before the cops could arrive. She hates how much she loves that thought.

Clearly the loser of this exchange, Danny tells everyone the bonus question won't be counted and to please bring their sheets up to the front.

Padmé stays a little longer to show she wasn't ruffled by the interaction, and then leaves before the final ranking can be announced. It doesn't matter. They never win.

When she gets to Anakin's house, the living room light is still on. She stands by the front door for a moment listening to the cartoonish sounds of whatever racing game he's playing. She wonders what he ate for dinner, if he got any reading done, if he cleaned a little like he said he would.

She unlocks the door with the house key he gave her last week. He glances away from the TV and his whole face lights up, while his video game car immediately crashes into a wall.

"Hey, babe," he says, pausing the game and setting the controller down. "I wasn't expecting you tonight. Did you have fun?"

She drops her purse on the couch and straddles his lap, leans in and kisses him like she just broke through the surface after nearly drowning. At least three of her friends brought their partners to trivia. But their partners all have similar degrees or work in other departments at the university. They're close in age. They have things in common. They make sense.

Anakin pulls away, a little breathless, and says, "Whoa, what's wrong?"

"I didn't have fun," she says. "I missed you."

"I missed you too. Are you hungry? I made mac 'n cheese."

She presses her face against his neck. "Your mom's recipe? Not Kraft?"

"Yep."

"I want some."

"Okay, hold on."

She clings to him as he stands up and takes her with him, and somehow he manages to get an entire bowl of mac 'n cheese into the microwave without setting her down. He's just talented like that.

She finally climbs down when she has no other choice, and she eats at the kitchen table sullenly, knowing he wants to ask what happened but won't, because he can read her, because he understands when she wants to talk and when she doesn't. She finishes the mac 'n cheese and feels a little better, gets up to rinse her bowl out and put it in the dishwasher. Anakin comes and curls around her back.

"What can I do to cheer you up, sweetheart?" he asks.

She clutches the edge of the sink. Tries to take deep, even breaths. Squeezes her eyes shut. A knot builds up in her throat. Why didn't she invite him? Why did she lie to him?

The dam breaks. A sob escapes her. She tries to regain her composure but she can't, it's too late.

"Oh my god," he says, and spins her around to face him. "Did something happen? Did someone hurt you?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know why I'm like this."

"Like what? Please help me understand."

She shakes her head and forces herself to calm down. "It's just PMS. Don't listen to me."

"You get grouchy when you're PMSing, not cry-y."

"We've been dating two fucking months, Anakin. How would you know?"

He pauses. "Okay. Lashing out. That's not cool."

"Let me go. I need air."

He lifts his hands up and takes a long step back. "I respect your boundaries."

"Stop with the therapy shit already!"

She storms out the back door so she can breathe. He follows and the dogs come out with him. She notices his ashtray on the table. It's clean. It's been clean since the day he said he'd quit.

"The therapy stuff is the only chance we have of working out," he says. "Pre-therapy Anakin would have been devastated you wanted to hang out with your friends tonight. I would have spent all evening in a jealous rage. But I didn't. I was fine. I've put a lot of work into myself and—"

"Please just fuck up. Just fuck up once. Just stop being so fucking perfect."

"I'm feeling very hurt and scared right now—"

"Stop it! Stop with the I-statements! Stop being so good all the time!"

"I don't understand what you want."

"I want you to be a codependent, jealous, possessive freak. I want you to choke me. I want you to drug me and fuck my unconscious body. I want you to cut me open and crawl inside me. I want you to miss me so bad when I'm gone you feel physical pain. I want you to give me a reason to leave you so I can choose to stay. I want you to climb down your ladder of moral righteousness and get in the filth with me."

"What moral righteousness? I'm unhealthily obsessed with you."

“No. You haven’t actually done anything wrong. You could have gotten my number from work but instead you waited *a year* for me to come to you. You were forward with me once I showed interest, but if I’d turned you down, you wouldn’t have chased after me. You gave me your number and I didn’t text you and you still didn’t chase after me. *I’m* the one who kissed you first. *I’m* the one who egged you on. You took me out to dinner and if I didn’t want to have sex after or see you again, you wouldn’t have pressed. You made sex easy for me, and you asked permission, and you were kind. I told you we were moving too fast and you tried to back off but I wouldn’t let you. You told me about the drugs and I walked away and you let me go. You listen to me. You respect me. You take care of me. You love me without demanding I love you back. All you do is open doors for me, and *I’m* the one who walks through.”

“That can’t be true. No one in their right mind would see us and think this is okay.”

“You eat well. You sleep well. You get enough exercise. You show up to the shop on time and do good work. You go to therapy. You go to NA meetings. You spend time with your family. You take good care of your dogs. You budget your money. You fix things when they break. You help your elderly neighbor bring in her groceries. You keep your house clean. You keep your yard clean. You’re organized, you’re focused, you’re motivated. That is not the life of someone in an unhealthy relationship. This entire time, your only crimes have been certainty, honesty, and loving me without reservation.”

He stares at her for a long time, his expression unreadable. She watches as a realization hits him. “You think you’re not good enough for me.”

She buries her face in her hands and shakes her head. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Oh, Padmé. Oh my god. What the hell happened tonight?”

“I lied to you. Everyone brings their partners to trivia. But I didn’t want you to come.”

He sighs like he’s disappointed, like he was expecting this. “Because you’re ashamed of the ex-junkie loser you’re in love with.”

“It’s not true. I’m not ashamed of you, I—”

“I see how nervous you get when we’re in public and people try to figure out if you’re my mom or my aunt or what.”

“I don’t care what they think.”

“Yes you do. You care what everyone thinks. And dating me publicly means everyone will finally see the personality you’ve kept so well hidden your entire life. You think I’m a reflection of you. That people will see you with a heroin addict mechanic thirteen years younger than you and think, ‘What a fall from grace.’”

The words come out rasping, broken. “People will think you’re not good enough for me. No one will know I’m the one who’s not good enough for you.”

“I know you want me to be an asshole right now, get angry and storm off so you can feel punished.” He steps into her space and wraps his arms around her. “But I can’t do that. Because I love you. Because I want to be good for you even when I’m hurt.”

She grips the back of his shirt in her fists and presses her face into his chest. “You’re making this so much worse.”

“I know. I just can’t hurt you, even if you ask me to.”

“You’re the only one who knows me. The only one who’s ever known me. And you love me anyway.”

He cups her face in his hands and forces her gaze up, even though the last thing she wants to see right now is his face. “I don’t love you anyway. I love you because I know you, and I know you because I love you.”

“I’m so afraid you’re going to come to your senses and leave me. You’ll realize I’m too old for you. You’ll realize you’re wasting your time with someone who’s never been in a relationship. You’ll realize you’ve put all this work into yourself, and I haven’t done the same because I’ve been too fucking busy trying to reach higher than I can.”

“I’m not going to leave you.”

“Do you promise?”

“I can promise you that right now, I’m in love with you and I want to be with you for as long as I possibly can. But I can’t promise we’ll be together forever, just like I can’t promise I won’t relapse. If you do something to really hurt me, I’ll break up with you. And I hope if I ever do something that really hurts you, you’d do the same.”

She feels a little better and she hates him for that, for comforting her and showing her compassion. For refusing to get on her level. She wants him to get angry. To scream at her. To break up with her so she can beg for forgiveness she’ll never deserve.

After she’s calmed down, she says quietly, “I’m sorry I didn’t invite you to meet my friends.”

Somehow amid all this, he manages an arrogant smile. “Inviting me to trivia is as good as cheating, so maybe it’s for the best.”

The following week, she texts the group chat, *I’m bringing my boyfriend tonight. He’s really good at trivia.*

There are some thumbs-up reactions to the text and Mark the experimentalist poet replies, *GOOD*

She’s nervous about it all day. The shop is so busy that Anakin has to work through lunch, and she can only drop off a sandwich to him and kiss him before he has to get back to the line of cars waiting for him.

She has no idea how it’s going to go, and she can’t stop thinking about what they’ll all say behind her back, even if it’s not mean, just wondering what’s up with their relationship and how they met and all that, too polite to ask her themselves. They’ll assume he was once her student, and even if they find out the truth, it won’t matter. She’s still capable of fucking someone her students’ age, and that’s bad enough.

On their way there, Anakin says, “I’m really sorry if I embarrass you.”

“You’re not going to embarrass me, honey,” she says, but she’s not sure it’s true.

At the bar, Padmé introduces Anakin to everyone. There’s eight of them tonight—a couple people she doesn’t recognize and probably should; Charlotte the Medievalist, her officemate; and the three MFA guys she calls “the beats” because they remind her so much of Kerouac, Cassady, and Ginsberg. There’s Kyle the novelist (Kerouac), Mark the experimentalist poet (Cassady), and Ravi the hybrid forms guy (Ginsberg). Like most MFAs, they are friendly, welcoming, and extremely annoying.

While Danny sets up, Mark regales everyone with a story about the time he drunkenly wandered onto a pig farm. For the first time since she’s known him, she’s intensely grateful for his need to be the center of attention. Anakin holds her hand under the table and sips his soda. She knows he doesn’t like bars, but he insisted it was fine, that being around alcohol doesn’t bother him.

The first round, Anakin remains quiet and polite, letting everyone discuss each question and only interjecting with the answer when no one knows or if someone gets it wrong. She can tell he’s trying very hard not to be rude or talk down to anyone when he corrects them. He’s maybe even wondering if he should just let them get a few wrong so as not to call attention to himself. But his competitive nature won’t allow it, especially since Kyle the novelist told him about their arch rivals, the guys from the physics department, and that they’ve only won twice in the entire time they’ve been playing.

They end up with a perfect score that round. Before the second round, Anakin texts her, *Why are all these people so bad at trivia i thought they were supposed to be smart*

She tells him, *Not everyone can have an eidetic memory like you.*

By the second round, Mark has traded seats with Kyle so he can sit next to Anakin. Before her very eyes, she watches a friendship form, like watching a flower blooming in a time lapse video.

“Dude. It’s Pasadena. I swear,” Mark says.

“No man, it’s Encino. Put Encino,” Anakin says.

The answer, of course, is Encino.

More of them turn their attention to Anakin as the game goes on, at first for answers but then out of curiosity. When someone asks what he does for a living and he says he’s a mechanic—nervously, she can tell, though he doesn’t let it show—it’s like a bomb drops. The group erupts into a million questions. How long has he been doing it? What kind of car does he own? Can he take a look at their engine sometime? It’s been making a weird noise.

It never occurred to Padmé that academics are so insular that they’d be thrilled to meet someone with a normal job. She suddenly feels an intense admiration toward Anakin for being so unapologetically himself—sharp-witted, polite, friendly, outgoing. He’s a little crass, a little rough around the edges. He has a good sense of humor. He has a beautiful smile. He somehow pays attention to everyone at once. By round five, they’ve won by a landslide and no one seems interested in leaving.

Mark claps his shoulder. "That was all you, man. Can I get you something to drink?"

"No thanks, I'm good," Anakin says, and looks to Padmé for praise. Since she can't really say *good job, baby*, she kisses his shoulder and rubs his back.

Mark returns with two pitchers of beer for the table. Anakin leans in and tells her quietly, "I don't care if you drink."

He stopped smoking for her. He's basically stopped eating meat for her. The least she can do is stop drinking.

"I'm fine," she tells him, and kisses him on the mouth. Around the table is a chorus of *oooohs* like they're children.

"You fucks think that's bad?" Anakin says, and full-on kisses her, tongue and everything.

The table cheers. Padmé pulls away and covers her reddened face with her hands, laughing hard, unable to believe how well this is going. Her friends like her boyfriend better than her, and she loves it. She loves that they love him.

Mark declares Anakin an honorary grad student and adds him to the group chat.

Then Danny stops by and puts a heavy hand on Padmé's shoulder. He's done working for the night, has a beer in his other hand, seems somewhat drunk. "If it isn't the woman who got us the shittiest president in the history of the country."

"If it isn't the most mediocre trivia emcee in the history of this town."

"Dude," Anakin says, surprisingly calm. "Get your hand off her."

To Anakin he says, "Do you know it's her fault we're in a recession? That we're seeing inflation numbers increase faster than they ever have before?"

"I'm telling you"—far less calm now— "walk away."

"Are you seriously going to defend this bitch?"

Anakin stands so quickly his chair topples over. He grabs the guy's wrist and wrenches it behind his back. Danny drops his beer and the glass shatters. They have everyone's attention now. Anakin takes Danny by the back of the neck and shoves him down over an empty table.

"Apologize to my girlfriend, you dead-eyed right-wing fuck," Anakin says.

Padmé should probably be bothered by all this, especially since the bartender is now yelling at them to take it outside. Mark shouts, "Yo man, fuck him up!"

Danny tries to say something that's definitely not an apology. Anakin wrenches his arm farther up his back, until it looks like he's about to pop the guy's shoulder out of its socket. Padmé kind of wants him to.

"Sorry!" Danny says, sounding pathetic. "I'm sorry for calling your girlfriend a bitch."

"Don't apologize to me. Apologize to her."

"I'm sorry, Miss Naberrie. I'm sorry."

Anakin lets Danny go just as the bartender comes over to shove him away. “I said take it outside, man.”

Anakin holds his hands up. “Look, I’m done. I’m done.”

For some reason nearly everyone in the bar starts clapping. Padmé didn’t realize how much everyone hated Danny. Despite this, the bartender points to the door and says, “Get out of here, man. Don’t come back.”

“What?!” Mark says. “You’re banning him?”

“He started a fight and he cheats at trivia. Yeah I’m banning him.”

“He doesn’t cheat!” Mark says, ready to throw down to uphold Anakin’s honor.

“Then how did you all get every question right?”

“He’s a genius, man, I don’t know, but I swear to you he didn’t cheat. I’ve been coming to this bar for years, man. Years.”

“I’m not kicking *you* out, I’m kicking *him* out.”

With the quivering rage of a man scorned, Mark says, “A slight on one of us is a slight on all of us.”

“I don’t care what you do with your night, man,” the bartender says. “I just want that guy gone, and I don’t want to see him in here again.”

Kyle says, “Let’s just go to a different bar?”

On their walk to the next bar, Anakin is walking a little ahead with the MFA guys. Charlotte the Medievalist walks astride her and says, “That was intense.”

“Intense things tend to happen around Anakin,” Padmé says.

“You’re not shaken up or anything?”

Padmé shrugs. “If I had a dollar for every time a Republican called me a bitch, I could fund a universal basic income. No one’s ever defended me though, so that was nice.”

“You’re not mad at him for getting us kicked out of our regular bar?”

“He got himself kicked out. The rest of you decided to follow him.”

“You don’t seriously think we’re going to play trivia without him. He’s indispensable. Mark’s gotten a taste of victory and he’s never going to let it go.”

“There are a dozen bars in this town that have trivia. I’m sure we’ll find something.” She shouts ahead, “How much farther?”

Ravi shouts back, “Half a mile!”

“Ugh,” Padmé says, wishing she hadn’t worn heels.

Anakin stops and waits for her to catch up, then he sinks down, his back to her, and taps his shoulder.

“Thank you, honey,” she says as she hops on his back, arms around his neck while he takes her by the thighs and hikes her up.

“I live to serve.”

This is the perfect position to kiss his neck. “I know you do, baby.”

The next bar is much smaller and much louder. Nearly everyone does a round of shots. Anakin continues to abstain, and Padmé with him. There are more people in their group now than when they were at the other bar—did Mark invite them? They find a pool table on the second floor and Anakin proceeds to kick everyone’s ass. Padmé adds *The Hustler* to her list of movies to eventually watch with him. She wonders when in his life he had the time to learn how to play, or if he’s just a natural at it because of his superhuman spatial reasoning skills and physical coordination.

As Kyle racks up the next game, Anakin comes over to her and asks, “You want to play a round, sweetheart?”

“I like watching you.”

He takes her hand. “Come on, let me teach you.”

And that’s how Anakin ends up bending her over the pool table, his hand on hers as they line up the shot, thirteen into the upper right pocket, and he’s saying in her ear, “Straight shot, right in,” while his other hand creeps up beneath her shirt, skates over her stomach, and gets very close to cupping her breast.

“You’re so fucking sexy,” he says right as she hits the cue ball, which hits the thirteen, which sinks into the pocket.

She stands upright, still in his space, his hand still over hers on the pool cue. “You tried to mess up my shot.”

He wraps an arm around her, pulls her closer. “Yeah? What are you going to do about it?”

“I might play you for real, and then what would you do?”

“I’d win.”

“You sure about that, baby?”

She hears the sound of a camera shutter, looks around to find Charlotte taking a picture of them. “Sorry!” she says. “You guys are just really cute.”

They play against each other, Padmé stripes and Anakin solids. Anakin just barely wins. They play another round and Padmé wins, but she strongly suspects it was because he let her.

“I think you threw that last shot,” she says, finally getting a moment alone with him in the corner while Ravi and Kyle take over the game.

“I would never sully your reputation like that.”

“Sure,” she says, her arms around his shoulders. “You ready to go home soon?”

"It's only midnight."

"And I'm a tired old lady who wants to sit on her boyfriend's face for a while before bed."

"You make a compelling point, but..." He looks over at the group. "I told the guys I'd ride them around in the Mustang."

"At midnight on a weekday. When you have work in the morning."

He leans in and whispers, "Does Mommy want to give me a curfew?" And while he's there he presses a few kisses to her neck, starts mouthing down her throat.

"It's not nice to do this to me in public," she says, sighing. "Make me want you so bad and not even come home with me."

"You're not upset with me for beating that guy's ass and getting you kicked out of your favorite bar?"

"Not at all. I love it when my baby takes care of me."

"Every queen needs a loyal knight."

She hasn't had anything to drink but she feels drunk. She's so close to opening her legs for him right here around all these people.

"Two a.m.," she says. "Not a minute later."

"And what happens if I'm late?"

"I'll spank you. One strike for every minute past the hour."

He bites his lip like he's trying to stop himself from moaning. "Belt? Paddle? Flogger?"

"Baby's choice."

"I love you."

She presses a light kiss to his mouth. "You go have fun with your new friends. I'll catch a ride with someone else."

Charlotte drops Padmé off at Anakin's place. "This isn't your apartment," she says.

"It's Ani's house. I basically live here now."

Padmé is just about to say thank you for the ride when Charlotte blurts out, "You two are really in love, aren't you?"

"I don't really know yet."

"How can you not know?"

There's no reason not to be honest. "It's only been a couple months. The age thing still feels weird sometimes. We have complicated histories, and a lot stacked against us."

"Like what?"

“It’s hard to explain.”

“Well I’ve never seen two people look at each other the way you do. You’re both so... happy.”

“This summer we have been, but I don’t know what’s going to happen when the semester starts.”

“Yeah,” Charlotte says, looking sad like Padmé has disappointed her by admitting things might not be perfect forever. “It might be tough, balancing coursework and teaching and having an insanely passionate relationship.”

“We’ll see I guess,” Padmé says, and opens the door before Charlotte can ask any other personal questions.

“You know, you guys look so different, but it kind of seems like you’re the same person.”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugs. “Vibes. Like if that situation were reversed and that guy was bothering him and not you, you would have killed him.”

“Do I seem violent?”

“Violently in love, yeah.”

“Hm,” she says. “For the sake of public safety, let’s hope no one tries to hurt him. I’ll see you at orientation, okay?”

She gets out of the car. Charlotte rolls down the window and says, “Are you kidding? I can’t tell if you’re kidding.”

Padmé waves. “Goodnight, Charlotte.”

Inside, Padmé pets the dogs and lets them outside and gives them treats. She showers to wash away the stink of the bars and the feeling of Danny’s hand on her shoulder. It feels weird being in Anakin’s house at night without him, doing the nightly routine they usually do together. There’s no playfully elbowing each other out of the way of the sink while they brush their teeth. No rubbing lotion on his back to help with his dry skin. No lying together in the dark, facing each other, talking about whatever until eventually they fall asleep.

In bed, she checks her messages. Nothing from Anakin, but several dozen messages from the group chat. She starts scrolling through them. At first it’s Mark, early in the evening saying he got them a table. Then a little note saying Anakin Skywalker has been added to the chat. Then all the people who couldn’t make it asking who the new person is, considering no one has met the incoming graduate students yet. Mark saying, *OUR TRIVIA SAVIOR*. Kyle clarifying, *His name is Anakin*. Anakin saying, *No need to be formal you can just call me Padmé’s boyfriend*

Twelve thumbs-up reactions to that message.

Later, Mark: *WE WON BITCHES 55/55 QUESTIONS CORRECT*

A number Padmé never entered into her phone so she has no idea who it is: *wtf???*

Mark: *TRIVIA SAVIOR YOOOOOOO*

Anakin: *Memorizing useless information is my calling*

There's some back and forth from people saying they wished they'd come out tonight.

Mark: *WE GOT KICKED OUT OF THE BAR YOOOOOOO*

The same number Padmé doesn't recognize: *again, wtf???*

Mark sends a short video of Anakin wrenching Danny's arm behind his back and slamming him onto the table, with the caption, *fr tho dude deserved it he called Padme a bitch*

Mark adds, *And hes a republican*

Some astonished and appalled back and forth in the chat. More people joining the conversation now that there's drama. Several people mention that Padmé doesn't deserve to be treated that way and Stan the rhetorician says, *Thank you for your service to this country Padme.*

Much agreeing among the group that Padmé did a good job getting the president elected.

Stacy the compositionist says, *Is Anakin okay?*

Anakin replies, *Im good! Not my first bar fight and wont be my last lmao*

Mark gives the address of the next bar and several people say they're on their way. That explains why their group got so much bigger between bars.

A little later, Charlotte sends the picture she took of Padmé and Anakin by the pool table, hands entwined together over the cue. Padmé looking up at him, head tilted a little with a daring look in her eye that she's never seen captured in a photo before. Anakin looking down at her, arm around her waist, smiling in a way that says very clearly: I love you. I want you. You're the only other person in this room.

It's the first picture she's ever seen of herself. Her real self.

Charlotte: *SO CUTE*, followed by a number of love-themed and celebration emojis.

Twenty-five people have reacted to the photo, a mix of thumbs up and hearts. Padmé checks the member list. There are only twenty-six people in the chat. She's the only one who hasn't responded.

There are many, many comments agreeing that Padmé and Anakin are very cute together, and offer their congratulations like the picture is some kind of engagement announcement. The people who weren't able to attend say they're looking forward to meeting him.

She gets to the end of the thread. There's a new message. It's from Mark, a video of Anakin's car going about a million miles an hour around some kind of dirt track she doesn't recognize. Twenty people are gathered on the sidelines to watch. The car starts doing donuts, tires kicking up dirt in a huge cloud. Mark says, *KING SHIT*

Padmé replies, *I don't mind you borrowing my boyfriend, but please don't get him killed. I am very fond of him.*

Mark says, *YOUR MAN HAS GIVEN US A TRULY WILD NIGHT WE ARE ALSO VERY FOND OF HIM*

Many people thumbs-up both messages. Before Padmé starts to worry about Anakin around a bunch of drunk rowdy boys, she clicks off her phone and shoves it under her pillow.

She wakes up to the feeling of Anakin kissing the nape of her neck and cupping her breast. His alarm clock reads 2:17.

She groans, says, "Hi, honey."

"Beautiful girl," he says as he kisses across her shoulder. "My beautiful, beautiful girl. I missed you."

There's a split second where she wonders if he drank, if he's high. But when she rolls onto her back to look at him, he's as clear-eyed and happy as always. Crisis averted.

"I missed you too, baby," she says. "Did you have fun?"

"I got to drive my car really fast and Mark proposed to me. So yeah, it was a pretty good night."

"Did you say yes?"

"I told him if you ever break up with me, I'd consider it."

"You're going to give Mark a sexual awakening."

"Pretty sure I already did."

"You do have that effect on people, don't you?"

"I can't help how hot I am."

"Mm, my little jailbait."

He kisses under her jaw, down her neck. "I only want to look good for Mommy."

She moans a little as he kisses down her chest. She didn't bother putting on pajamas, figuring he'd fuck her as soon as he came home no matter what time it was.

"Gotta give you a spanking tomorrow," she says, threading her fingers into his hair.

"I waited in the driveway for half an hour. I was going to wait longer but I couldn't."

"Seventeen is a fair number."

"Plus five for general insolence?"

"We'll see. I don't want to hurt baby too bad."

"But baby wants to be hurt bad."

He spends a long time sucking on her nipples, teasing her, getting her wet. As he kisses down her stomach, he asks, "Do you like that picture of us?"

"I look like I want to eat you alive. Do I always look at you like that?"

"Always," he says. "You realize it's the only picture we have together? We never take selfies or anything."

She hadn't realized that, but it's true. She's never thought to take a picture, except the one she took of him kneeling and bound, which she had planned to use for masturbation fodder but hasn't had to masturbate at all since they got together. "Once your face has been plastered all over the internet and TV, selfies kind of lose their appeal."

"Makes sense." He kisses down her inner thigh. "But we'll get wedding pictures, right?"

"Of course."

He stops and grins up at her.

It takes her a minute to realize what she said. She shoves and kicks him and says, "You tricked me!"

"You want to marry me."

"No I don't. I hate you," she says, still struggling against him, and now they're wrestling, and somehow he manages to gather her wrists together in one hand and pin them above her head.

"You want to marry me. You want to have kids with me. You want to live happily ever after with me."

"Never. This is slander. I'm calling my lawyer."

He kisses her for a long time. It heats up quickly. He grinds against her and she hates that he's still wearing clothes, starts to tug at them so he'll start getting undressed. He pulls away from her mouth just long enough to take off his shirt, and he's gotten pretty good at kissing her while he's taking off his pants. She can finally feel his cock rubbing against her and she's so tired but it feels so good.

"How do you have so much energy still?" she asks.

A kiss to a corner of her mouth. "I'm young." A kiss to the other. 'I'm alive.' Gently nipping her lower lip. "I'm in love."

She lifts her hips up to meet his. "Come on, baby. Put it in."

He teases her, presses the tip of his cock just at her entrance. "Playing roulette again?"

"It wouldn't be so bad, would it? If something came of it?"

He sinks into her slowly. "Not at all."

"I love thinking about it," she says as he rocks into her at a steady, even pace. "Love imagining you as a father. You'd be so good at it."

He lets his head fall against her shoulder, groans, fucks her a little harder.

“I want to get so big when I’m pregnant. I want people to look at me and know I belong to you.”

“Padmé...”

“Don’t you think about it too? Me walking around with your baby inside me?”

“Fuck,” he breathes. “I never stop thinking about it. I want it so bad.”

“Happily ever after, right?”

He lifts his head, looks into her eyes, runs his thumb across her bottom lip. “Crazy in love for the rest of our lives.”

Chapter 5

A week before the semester starts, Padmé arrives at the auto shop to take Anakin to lunch. She enters, distracted, rooting through her purse to find a coupon she swore she had for the Mexican place down the street, and when she glances up she sees Dr. Kenobi talking to Anakin. Dr. Kenobi's back is to her. Anakin hasn't spotted her yet.

"I don't know, man," Anakin is saying, "I think electric's going to come in a lot slower than we think. Especially in flyover states. Like sure, you can buy an electric car but there's almost nowhere around here you can charge it."

"Well, yes, but—" Dr. Kenobi catches her at the corner of his eye as she approaches the desk.

Her mind grinds to a halt. She doesn't have time to think. She should have run. Why didn't she run?

As always, Anakin's face lights up when he sees her. "Hey, b—"

She shoves her keys into his hand. "Thank god you could get me in today. I'm so glad my neighbor was around to jumpstart me, but I think the battery's on its last leg." She pretends to spot Dr. Kenobi. "Oh, my gosh. Hi, Dr. Kenobi. What a surprise."

She has a campaign smile plastered on. She won't look at Anakin.

"Padmé! What a wonderful coincidence," Dr. Kenobi says. "I was just about to call you again."

"I'm so sorry I didn't get back to you. It's been a crazy summer. I've just buried myself in research, and my sister's pregnant, and, well, you know how it is."

"Well congratulations to your sister. Is it a boy or a girl?"

"A boy. He's due in January."

To Anakin, Dr. Kenobi says, "I'm advising Padmé's dissertation." To Padmé: "It was, what, a year ago that I recommended this place to you?"

"Just about," Padmé says.

When she finally looks at Anakin, he's betraying nothing, looks as calm and composed as if they were both strangers to him.

"I appreciate the referral," Anakin says. "She's had a lot of work done with us."

"My fault for buying a lemon," Padmé explains with a laugh that sounds a little hysterical. "I bought it thinking it would at least get me through the doctorate, but I don't think that's going to happen."

"I was actually just talking to Anakin about buying a new car. He seems to know everything there is to know about what's on the market, don't you, Anakin?"

“What can I say, I’m just a car guy.” Anakin offers an easy smile. The illusion is so convincing that for a moment she lets herself believe everything will be okay.

“Since we’re both sans vehicle,” Dr. Kenobi says to Padmé, “maybe now would be a good time to chat?”

“Yeah, that’d be great. There’s a coffee shop just up the street.”

To Anakin, Dr. Kenobi says, “Would you mind giving us a call when you’re done?”

“Not a problem,” Anakin says, rapping his knuckles on the desk, taking a step backward toward the garage. And then she sees it—the look in his eyes. The hurt. “You two have a good lunch.”

“Are you alright, Padmé?” Dr. Kenobi asks. “You seem a little... out of it.”

“It’s just been an exhausting day, with my car and all.”

He nods sympathetically. “At least it’s in good hands now.”

She sips her chai and tries to focus, but she can’t stop thinking about Anakin. How quietly he understood. How easily he went along with it. Why did she do it? Why couldn’t she have just said, *Hi Dr. Kenobi, this is my boyfriend Anakin. I orgasm when he calls me Mommy and I refuse to think too deeply about why.*

Not that last part. But still.

“So you’re considering focusing on ecofeminist criticism of Victorian children’s literature, is that correct?”

“I’ve already started putting my reading list together.” She shuffles through her purse and finds the notebook where she jots down ideas.

As she flips through the pages, Dr. Kenobi makes an amused sound. “That’s a very interesting notebook.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone treat a notebook that way before. The lines are there for a reason, you know. Is that even English?”

The notebook is open to a page littered with text, some small, some big, some horizontal, some vertical, some overlapping other writing. She writes so fast her letters all connect together until each word is barely more than a line with bumps in it. The only thing that would be discernible to anyone else are the words SECRET GARDEN written in all caps in the middle of the page, some of the letters stretching out into little flowers.

She thinks of Mary Lennox. How empty and lonely her life is at the beginning of her story. How she transforms when she finds her garden. How she learns that happiness is real.

An hour or so later, the shop calls.

“Hi, Ms. Amidala,” Anakin says in his customer service voice. “Your car is ready whenever you want to pick it up.”

“Thanks, I’ll be there soon.”

He hangs up.

“Well,” Dr. Kenobi says with a pleasant smile, “I guess we better head out.”

They walk back to the shop. Dr. Kenobi goes on at length about the monograph he’s been working on for ten years, which Padmé should really have a better idea about, but she always spaces out while he’s talking. It has to do with Marxism? Modernism? Both?

At the shop, Anakin checks Dr. Kenobi out and goes through the usual things—tire rotation, air filter, windshield wiper fluid. They chat a little bit longer because Dr. Kenobi could make conversation with a two-by-four if he had to, and then he turns to Padmé and says, “I’m so glad we finally got a chance to talk. I’ll see you at orientation?”

“I’ll be there,” she says.

Dr. Kenobi leaves. Padmé waits for the doors to close behind him before whirling back to the desk. “Anakin, please—”

“Sorry, do we know each other?”

“I don’t know what I was thinking.”

His smile is cruel. “I know exactly what you were thinking. You were thinking, ‘My dissertation advisor can’t know I’m dating a heroin addict.’”

“He doesn’t even know that about you.”

“Oh, he does. He’s a good family friend. He paid for my mom’s cremation. He helped pay for my rehab.”

“I had no idea.”

“And by the way, congrats to your sister. Would have loved to know she existed.” He tosses her keys to her. She catches them. “See you around, Padmé.”

In all their conversations, she’s never told him anything about her family. It’s like there’s a partition between him and them, one she can’t break down no matter how hard she tries. When she’s with Anakin, it feels like she’s in a completely different dimension than they are.

“Please, baby. Let’s talk about this.”

“Oh, I’m not your baby. I’m just the guy who fixes your car.”

“That’s not *true*—” she tries to say, but he’s already gone.

She spends the remainder of the afternoon vacillating between “I have to fix this” and “maybe it’s for the best.” This was only ever supposed to be their crazy teen summer fling, and now summer is ending and so is their relationship. She only ever thought they would last

a couple months, had felt so acutely the clock ticking down to zero. She just didn't know the bomb would go off today.

She's not that far in the wrong. It's not about Anakin. It's about Dr. Kenobi seeing Padmé taking advantage of a boy significantly beneath her in age, class, and education. It's really not about Anakin. She knows Anakin is kind, loving, and intelligent. She knows he's put more work into his own growth than anyone she's ever known. But looking at him, you wouldn't know that. Looking at him, all you see are tattoos covering up track marks. Motor oil and dirt caked under his nails. Worn-out clothes riddled with holes, covered with tacky pop culture references. A lovely house he'll never own, destined to be abandoned. A desperate boy in an endless state of grief, looking for any solid foundation to lay beneath his feet, filled with hope for a future that will never come to pass. It is *not* about Anakin.

But—she doesn't know if she can go back to the way she was living before. Not knowing how it feels to be loved so well.

She lets herself into his house. C3PO comes over to bonk his head against her calf and R2D2 rolls onto his back for belly pats, which she can't give because her hands are full. She can hear the shower running. In the kitchen, she looks around for a vase but doesn't find one, so she puts the flowers she bought in a little mason jar that she usually uses for iced tea. The bouquet has pink hibiscus, because pink is his favorite color even though he'll never admit it.

"Sorry for being a chode," he says. She startles, turns around from the bouquet to see him reading what's on the cake she bought. "Good use of the word 'chode.'"

"Thank you. I learned it from my students."

His hair is wet. He didn't bother putting on a shirt but he's wearing the galaxy-themed pajama pants she bought him the last time she fell into an online shopping fugue state.

"I was going to pick up some Indian food, but I figured you already ate," she says.

"Nope."

He pulls a plate from the cabinet and a knife and fork from a drawer, cuts a small slice of cake, and puts it on the plate.

"That's for you," he says, and takes the entire cake box with him into the living room.

She follows, sits on the edge of the couch with the slice of cake on her knees and a fork gripped in her hand. The dogs are at her feet instead of his because they know she's a soft touch when it comes to sneaking them scraps. *Jeopardy!* is on TV. Anakin effortlessly answers every question while he eats cake straight from the box.

"It's vanilla," she says, "with raspberry and buttercream."

"It's good. What is the Black Sea?"

"You should really eat more than cake for dinner."

He turns his head slowly toward her. "Are you really going to mommy me right now?"

"I resent you making that a verb. And I'm not trying to be sexy right now."

"Okay well too bad, you're always sexy."

"I'm trying to have a serious conversation with you, Anakin."

"And I'm trying to eat my regret cake and win *Jeopardy!*, Padmé."

She picks up the remote and turns off the TV.

"You know I hate when you do that," he says.

She sets the cake and remote on the coffee table and inches closer to him, puts her hand on his thigh. "Ani, please. Even if you still want to break up with me, I want you to believe me when I say I'm sorry."

He exhales like he's been defeated. "I'm not angry, you know. I'm just sad. Really, really sad."

"I know."

"This is the second time you've done this."

"I know."

"I feel like you're going to keep doing it."

"I won't. I promise I won't."

He sets the cake box aside and runs a hand down his face. "You know what really sucks?"

"What?"

"I hate myself so much I wouldn't want to be seen dating me either."

He goes to say something else but the words seem to get stopped up. She can see his eyes start to turn glassy.

"Oh, Ani."

Even if he doesn't want her to, she climbs onto his lap so she can hold him. He wraps his arms around her and buries his face in her chest. She strokes his wet hair, kisses the top of his head which smells like her shampoo.

"I'm sorry I'm not good enough for you," he says. "I'm sorry I look like what I look like and my life is what it is. I'm sorry I dropped out of high school. I'm sorry I have substance abuse issues. I'm sorry I filed bankruptcy. I'm sorry I have no ambition. I'm sorry you can't let yourself love me because I'm a deadbeat loser without a future."

She doesn't know what to say. She came here to apologize to him, and he's the one apologizing.

"This hurts so bad," he says. "The thought of losing you feels worse than my mom dying. At least with her I knew it was going to happen. But I really thought we had a chance."

She swallows down the knot in her throat. She has to be strong for him. All she can do is pet his hair and shush him, tell him he didn't do anything wrong, that things will be okay, that

she's the one who's sorry.

After a long while he asks quietly, "Do you still want to be with me?"

"Of course I want to be with you."

He looks up at her. "Do you remember when you asked me to fuck up? To stop doing everything right?"

She swipes the tears off his cheeks with her thumbs. "Yes."

"I'm going to do something wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I know I should stand up for myself, but—I just want to forget this happened. You want to be with me, and I want to be with you, and we both want things to go back to normal. So, let's go back to normal. I'm probably making too big a deal of it anyway."

All the tension in her body relaxes. She almost cries in relief. She holds his face in her hands and kisses him.

"Thank you, baby," she says. "I'll be better for you, I promise."

"I don't want you to be better for me," he says quietly, an afterthought, maybe more to himself than to her. "I want you to be better for you."

A few days later, her phone vibrates under her pillow. It's ten a.m. They went to bed at four in the morning after several hours of shibari practice which wasn't even that sexy considering most of it was watching tutorials on YouTube. They'd intended to go to bed around two, but after they were finished they ended up talking for another couple hours. She doesn't even remember falling asleep, just that one moment she was telling him about the girl who used to bully her in middle school and the next she was unconscious.

She ignores her phone. It vibrates again. And a third time. Anakin lightly bumps his head against the nape of her neck and says, "Make it stop."

When she tries to move, her entire body is sore. Maybe they went too hard last night. Maybe she's getting too old to be on the receiving end of bondage.

With extreme reluctance she pulls her phone out. It's on twenty percent battery because she forgot to plug it in. She has a dozen text messages from a dozen different people.

She bolts upright. *Where are you?* the first one says. It's from Charlotte the Medievalist. The others are all variations of the same question from everyone in her cohort.

"*Fuck.*" She scrambles out of bed and looks for anything remotely appropriate to wear. She keeps an entire drawer of clothes here and fills up a not-insignificant portion of Anakin's closet, but it's all joggers and tank tops. She has a few dresses but they're all in the hamper, wrinkled and probably come-stained.

"What's wrong?" Anakin asks sleepily. She refuses to look back at him, where she knows she'll see him all cute and sleepy and then it will take more willpower than she has not to get

back in bed.

“Orientation started an hour ago. I totally forgot.”

“Isn’t this your fifth semester? Aren’t you already oriented?”

“Yeah but—” She doesn’t have time to explain departmental politics and power games. “It’s required.”

All she can find are a pair of jean shorts and a semi-wrinkled tank top. The shorts are too short to cover the hickeys on her inner thighs, and there are still faint ligature marks on her wrists and over her shoulders. Fantastic. Just fucking fantastic.

She looks in the bathroom mirror to put her hair up and sees the situation is more dire than she thought. The red marks are obvious. There’s no way you could look at her and not figure out what she’d been doing the night before. She pulls off the tank top and rifles through Anakin’s closet for his least tattered t-shirt. She settles for one with Nyan Cat on it. It’s huge on her but she doesn’t care. She puts a dozen bangles on one wrist and Anakin’s neglected FitBit on the other.

When she returns to the bedroom, Anakin is gone. She puts on her shoes and grabs her purse and keys, and is on her way out the door when Anakin waylays her with a thermos of coffee and a granola bar.

“Oh my god, thank you,” she says, and reaches up to kiss him before rushing out the door.

“Love you, bye!” he calls after her.

Orientation is held in a small auditorium, a third of them new students from the incoming cohort. At the front, Dr. Kenobi is giving the lecture he gives every year, a tacky PowerPoint with a stock design template.

“Padmé,” he says cheerfully when she enters. “Lovely of you to finally join us.”

“Sorry,” she says, taking a seat in the back by Charlotte. Everyone in the room turns to look at her.

“Wow,” Charlotte whispers when Dr. Kenobi continues on about how important it is to reply to student emails in a timely fashion. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you dress down before.”

“I was doing yard work,” Padmé says, even though she has never done yard work in her life.

“At nine in the morning?”

“Gotta get it in before the heat of the day hits,” she says, which is what Anakin always says when she complains about him mowing the lawn too goddamn early in the morning.

As she spaces out on Dr. Kenobi’s annual plea to please not fuck the undergraduates, she realizes how much she has to do before the semester starts. She’s teaching two sections of comp I, a class she hasn’t taught since her master’s. She has no idea how the comp director

has the course set up, or if Padmé has free reign over the syllabus. So she has an entire class to plan, a course shell to build, readings to choose, assignments to write, not to mention she still has to buy all the books for this semester and do the reading for the first week of classes, which personally she thinks should be illegal. She also has to buy a new parking permit and figure out where the hell her classes are. All in the next forty-eight hours.

Her phone buzzes. She looks at it and finds a text from Anakin that reads, *Sorry for making you late*

It's not your fault. I totally forgot about it.

She adds, *It IS your fault there are a bunch of hickeys on my thighs.*

I cant help youre delicious

Your mouth is an industrial strength vacuum cleaner.

Complain to me next time Im giving you multiple orgasms

He adds, *Im going to the store need anything?*

Just as she's about to tell him to pick up a loaf of the sourdough she likes from the bakery, Dr. Kenobi says, "Padmé, what are your thoughts?"

She is way, way too old for this shit, and she refuses to be embarrassed about not paying attention to a lecture she's already heard twice. "About what?"

"Jessica asked for advice regarding teaching Intro Lit."

There are at least three other grad students here who have taught that class more recently than she has. Also Dr. Kenobi is the one who manages the resource Dropbox for the course. She even used his syllabus the last time she taught it.

"Don't pick boring books," she says. "And don't be an asshole."

There are some subdued laughs from the audience. Dr. Kenobi is smiling at her in a way she can't read.

"Would you like to be more specific?" he asks.

"No."

More laughter. Dr. Kenobi says, "I guess that's our pedagogy lesson for the day then. Are there any other questions? Now's the time to ask."

Week one is always a crapshoot. At least, that's what she tries to tell herself when she gets to her first class three minutes late, can't remember her university password, and has to reset it while twenty-three freshmen watch. Once she finally gets her shit together it's ten minutes into the class session, and she knows she's already lost them, probably for the whole semester. Number one rule of pedagogy: first impressions are everything.

As she's going over the syllabus, she has to admit to them that she only has the schedule complete through the first unit and she hasn't built the course shell yet, but she promises it

will be up later that night. Usually by the end of class the first day, a couple students stay after to introduce themselves and tell her they're looking forward to the class, but this time when she dismisses them, they all just leave.

The next class will go better. It has to.

Dr. Kenobi finally approved a few dissertation hours, so she's only taking two courses this semester, a survey of modernism and a seminar on Chaucer. Again, not really her field of study, but she signed up for classes late and those were what was left. Both of them require more reading than she can possibly have time to do. The cohort often makes fun of her for being the only one who does *all* the reading, but this semester, there's just no way.

Modernism lets out at eight in the evening. She's absolutely exhausted, knows she should go back to her apartment and heat up a frozen meal and post her course shell like she promised, not to mention plan her next class and get started on all the reading for next week, but when she looks at her phone and sees a text from Anakin—*how was your first day back?*—she decides that maybe she can slack just a little and get caught up tomorrow.

When she gets to his house, he has lasagna waiting for her and listens while she talks about her awful day. After, as she's dragging him to the bedroom, he stops her.

"Don't you have stuff you have to do for tomorrow?" he asks.

She runs her hands under his shirt, over his bare stomach, reaches up his back and drags her nails down. She loves the way his eyes flutter shut.

"Nope," she says, "I got everything done already."

She buys a pregnancy test in advance of actually needing it, but ends up getting her period two days early.

Sunday night of week two, after a weekend of not doing anything, Anakin is giving her a foot rub while they watch TV.

"I thought a doctorate was like, a ton of work," he says.

"It is," she says distractedly. "It's just been a slow start."

She tries to balance everything. Teaching, coursework, dissertation research, Anakin. She tries to get work done at his house so it will at least feel like they're spending time together. He'll be playing his Switch or reading quietly at the opposite end of the couch, not bothering her, and she won't be able to stop looking at him, whatever marks she'd last left on him, his dark eyes and his sweet mouth, and eventually she'll abandon her laptop and crawl over to him, kiss up his thigh, tug down the elastic of his boxers and take him in her mouth. He'll

thread his fingers into her hair and ask if she's finished with her work, and she'll say yes, of course, the afternoon is theirs.

Other days, she'll tell herself adamantly that today is the day she's going to get caught up, and she'll sit in the library with her phone on silent for two, four, eight, ten hours at a time. She'll feel foggy and out of it by the time she leaves, look at her phone and see a string of vaguely panicked texts and missed calls from Anakin because she hasn't told him where she is. *This isn't like you*, he'll say. *I don't mean to worry but it's been a really long time*. At least, that's what happens the first time. The second, third, and fourth time, he only reminds her that leftovers are in the fridge if she wants them, and he's going to bed.

No matter how distracted she gets, when she looks at Anakin, he's always looking back at her, ready to give himself to her completely, waiting for an order.

She skips seminar once because she just can't bring herself to care enough about going. Another time, she falls asleep and Ravi the hybrid forms guy has to politely nudge her to wake her up. Her students are the most disengaged they've ever been; half of them aren't turning in their work, most of them don't come to class. Dr. Kenobi forwards her an ecofeminist CFP and she ignores it.

One night after staying late in her office once again desperately trying to get caught up, she goes straight from campus to Anakin's house, expecting him to have dinner ready like he always does, but the house is dark. She goes inside and greets the dogs, turns on the light, looks around for any sign of him. She checks her phone. Dead.

She plugs it in and waits for it to power on. When it finally does, she has a message from Anakin that says, *Where are you?*

Did they have plans? Was she supposed to be somewhere tonight?

At home. Why?

She waits for him to reply. He doesn't.

She checks the cohort group chat, which has seven hundred messages she hasn't read because she hasn't checked it since the last time she went to trivia. She scrolls through, doesn't read all of them, but Anakin is fairly active in it. Apparently he's hung out with her cohort several times and somehow she didn't notice.

At the end of the message thread, there's a reminder about a reading for the lit mag. Mark the experimentalist poet is reading tonight along with a few other MFAs she doesn't recognize. He promises there will be cookies. He personally asks Anakin to attend, to which Anakin replies, *Yeah ill be there* with a thumbs up emoji.

At least there's a reason he's not replying. He's at a reading, where it's rude to look at your phone. It feels like there are a ton of readings every semester but Padmé never goes to them. She tells herself it's because she's busy but really it's because they give her an unbearable amount of secondhand embarrassment. She could never be a creative writer. Exposing your heart like that in front of an audience, trusting they'll accept and appreciate your most intimate work—mortifying.

She roots around in the fridge and finds leftover quinoa to heat up. Just as she's done eating and putting her dishes in the dishwasher, Anakin texts back: *There was a lit mag*

reading

She says, *Sorry I couldn't make it.*

Do you mind if I go play darts with the guys?

She waits for him to ask if she'd like to come. He doesn't.

You don't have to ask permission., she tells him.

Yeah I do youve been really lonely lately

She reads the message over and over, trying to see if maybe it's a typo.

How can I be lonely? You and I are always together.

Youre never all the way there when we hang out, youre always a little checked out

He adds, *You seem sad all the time*

I'm sorry. I didn't know. I'll try to be more present.

You cant when youre scattered a hundred different ways

I'm not scattered.

You can only be one person, not the dozen youre trying to be

What does that even mean? Is it more NA jargon?

Have fun with the guys., she says, and puts her phone on silent.

He gets home around one in the morning. She pretends to be asleep as she listens to him get ready for bed. Soft sigh of shoelaces coming undone. Feather-light thump of clothes thrown into the hamper. Rush of the sink as he brushes his teeth. She always tells him to turn the water off while he's brushing. He never does.

Behind her, a dip in the bed. His arm over her waist, body curling around hers. He rubs his thumb back and forth across her wrist.

"I know you're awake," he says.

She glances back at him. "How?"

"You make this little clucking sound when you're asleep."

"I do?"

"It's so cute. Sometimes I stay awake just so I can hear it."

He rubs her lower stomach, kisses the back of her shoulder, slots his knee between her legs. "I can't help but notice you're in your jammies."

"Yeah."

"You don't want to do anything tonight?"

“No.”

“What’s wrong? Are you mad at me for going to the reading?”

“Of course not, honey. Did you have fun?”

“I don’t know. Mark’s poetry is, well... it required a lot of audience interaction. And he had a slideshow.”

“That doesn’t sound like poetry.”

“After listening to the guys talk shop for so long, I’m beginning to wonder if I even know what poetry is. He really wants me to apply to the program and I don’t have it in me to tell him I can’t even apply for an undergrad degree.”

“Would you want to go to college if you could?”

“I mean, maybe? But I’d do mechanical engineering or something. I’ve never written anything in my life.”

A complicated wave of feelings wash over her at the thought of Anakin going to college. He really does have no ambition. None. On one hand, she loves that she’s found someone willing to follow her wherever she goes. On the other, ambition has been so ingrained in every aspect of her life, she can’t fathom his ability to accept his circumstances. She guesses in a way that’s the culmination of all the work he’s done to better himself—acceptance.

“I have a question,” she says.

“Yeah?”

“You don’t have to answer it. There might not even be an answer.”

“Try me.”

It takes her a moment to figure out how to word it. “Why does everything hurt now when it didn’t before?”

“What do you mean?”

“In my old life, I mean. Nothing could shake me. There were entire websites devoted to hating me. I had to live knowing at any given moment, thousands of people were probably talking about me and the work I was doing. And I didn’t care. I really didn’t care. Now I get a passive-aggressive email from a student and I almost break down crying. I feel so weak.”

“You’re not weak. You’re just letting yourself feel for the first time. You’re letting yourself be happy, and once that door’s open, you let in all the other stuff too.”

“It’s not just that though. I used to be able to balance things. I could do everything I had to do, even if I lost sleep or skipped meals. It was like nothing could touch me.”

“That sounds like sacrifice, not balance. You sacrificed who you are to be a projection of yourself, and that’s why all that awful shit couldn’t hurt you. Nothing being able to touch you—that’s not a good thing, Padmé.”

“I want to shut the door again. I want it to stop.”

"You can't do that and be with me at the same time."

"Why not?"

"I make you happy. Can't you see that happiness is changing you?"

"I don't want to change. I liked who I used to be. I worked so hard to become that person."

"That person isn't you. That person is a strawman you built to take the arrows of other people's cruelty."

"If all of this is so obvious to you, why are you still with me?"

"I see all the progress you're making. I believe in you."

"I don't deserve it."

"You don't get to decide that."

They're quiet for a long time. She can tell he's not asleep. Can tell he's listening to her breathe, because that's always what he's doing. Listening.

"You were right," she says. "I am lonely. But I don't know why."

"Because you have all of me," Anakin says, sounding tired. Not sleepy—exhausted. "But I may only ever have a piece of you."

Dr. Organa asks her to stay after class. "I'm concerned," he says. "When I had you for practicum a couple years ago, you were one of my best students. This semester you seem... well, you're struggling. Is there something going on?"

"No," she assures him. "I'm sorry. I'll do better, I promise."

"If there's anything I can do to help, please let me know. I mean that sincerely."

The conversation rattles her so badly that she cancels office hours and goes to her apartment for the afternoon. For the first time in a long time, she needs some time alone.

Eggplant parmesan tonight?, Anakin asks.

It's Thursday. Anakin probably just got home from the farmer's market. Eggplant parmesan is her favorite meal that he makes. She imagines on a different day, an easier day, she would head over to his house. They would eat dinner. Talk about their day. Take the dogs for a walk. Watch TV. Have sex until they wear themselves out. How did it get like this? It felt like just last week Anakin was nothing more than the mechanic who may or may not have been flirting with her. Now he's everything.

I can't. I have a paper due tomorrow.

It's a lie—she had a paper due last week that she didn't turn in, which is probably what tipped the scales from Dr. Organa minding his business to deciding he needed to talk to her. She expects Anakin to send the pleading face emoji and say she can come over and work on it. But—why does she always expect that? For him to be clingy and manipulative? He's never

replied that way when she's asked for space, not once. Is that just what she wants, for him to beg her, need her?

Ok ill save you leftovers, he says with the blushy smiley face emoji. He follows up with, *I love you* and a red heart.

He doesn't text again the rest of the night. It takes until two in the morning, but she finishes the assignment and turns it in to Dr. Organa with an apology email, thanking him for speaking with her that afternoon and being patient with her. By three, she's finished her reading for the next day, and by four she's mostly caught up on grading and responding to student emails. She tries to go to bed but can't sleep, ends up opening her laptop again and planning out the next unit in comp. When she glances up again, the sun is rising. She looks at the date. Exactly one year from the day she met Anakin.

Teaching goes well that morning. Not objectively, but better than it's been. More students than usual show up and a few of them even participate. After class she returns to her office where Charlotte the Medievalist is on her way out, and Padmé is grateful to have the place to herself for once. She keeps the door open a crack for office hours even though she hasn't had a single student attend them.

Around noon, there's a knock on the door. "Come in," she says.

She glances up and there's Anakin. He's holding a bag of food. His hair is drenched, droplets of water slipping down the shoulders of his jacket. "Thought I'd drop off some lunch."

She can only stare at him. The dimensional rift narrows. Anakin, here, at school—she feels like she's in two realities at once.

"Because you bring me lunch all the time," he says. "And, you know, you're always complaining about forgetting to pack something and having to resort to the vending machines."

The trouble he had to have gone to—finding visitor parking, locating the English department building, stopping at the front office to ask where her office is, navigating the labyrinthian halls to find her. And it's raining. He walked all the way from visitor parking to the English department building in the rain. He's probably never been on a university campus before. He's probably facing all sorts of sadness and regret and what-ifs by being here. Just to bring her lunch.

He sets the food on her desk. "There's a fork and a bottle of water too. Hey, are you okay?"

She touches her cheek. Her fingertips come away wet.

"Padmé?"

"I—" love you so much it's killing me.

Another knock on the door, which is now wide open. Dr. Kenobi is holding a thermos in one hand, an umbrella under his arm, messenger bag over his shoulder. "Pad—" He spots

Anakin. “Anakin? I didn’t know you went to school here.”

She imagines her next committee meeting, both Dr. Kenobi and Dr. Organa kindly but firmly telling her she’s slacking. That she’s checked out. That she’s scattered. That she’s trying to be a dozen different people. That she’s a strawman. Vaguely threatening to cut her funding. Finding out about Anakin, putting two and two together that the reason she’s been slipping is because she’s having the head-over-heels love affair that would have made more sense at sixteen. Looking down on her for it, for loving someone like him, because they would, because they’re always looking for a reason to judge her. Everyone is always judging her.

“He doesn’t,” Padmé says cheerfully. “He’s a prospective student. We just got back from a campus tour. I was answering some questions he had about the program.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” Dr. Kenobi says, clapping Anakin on the shoulder. “You didn’t tell me you got your GED.”

Anakin isn’t playing it cool this time. He looks suddenly very fragile, very young, like a child who fell down and scraped his knees for the first time. A child who has just learned that when he falls, he bleeds.

“We have a phenomenal undergraduate program, and we would really love to have you,” Dr. Kenobi says. “I’m not on the admissions committee this year but I would be happy to put in a good word for you. I was always hoping you’d come over to the humanities.”

“Yeah,” Anakin says. “Great. Thanks.”

Dr. Kenobi turns his attention to Padmé. “When you have a moment, Padmé, I’d like to speak with you. I spoke to Bail and—well, we’ll talk. Okay?”

“Sure, okay,” Padmé says. “I’ll be over soon.”

To Anakin he says, “It’s good seeing you, Anakin. If you have any questions at all about applying, don’t hesitate to reach out.”

He leaves. Anakin stares at the doorway, at the place Dr. Kenobi had been standing.

Without looking back, he says, “I guess I do have boundaries.”

She feels light-headed. She struggles to pull in a breath. She wants to stand but doesn’t think her legs will hold her up. “Ani—”

“I’ll pack up the stuff you have at my house. You can come get it while I’m at work. Leave the key on the table.”

“Please wait, let’s talk about this.”

“I love you, Padmé. I love you more than I’ve ever loved anything. But I’ve had too much fucking therapy and unfortunately for both of us, I have enough self-worth to know that I deserve better.”

“We can fix this. This is fixable. We can—”

His eyes are rimmed red. “We can’t fix anything. *You* have to fix all the ways you’ve broken yourself. I am so sick of being your dirty little secret. I’m sick of hating myself

because you're ashamed of me. I'm sick of waiting for you to have the courage to tell everyone to go fuck themselves. *That's* the kind of person I deserve. Not a fucking coward."

She nearly gets on her knees. "I love you, Ani, I really do, please."

He stares at her in shock. Then he ducks his head, laughs a little like he's amused, like he just heard the punchline of a joke. "You don't love me, Padmé. You need me. Thanks for showing me the difference."

She's frozen. She can't think. She can't breathe. All she can do is watch him walk away.

Her meeting with Dr. Kenobi passes in a fog. Like Dr. Organa, he tells her he's concerned, asks if she's doing alright. She says she is, she's just had a difficult semester and she promises to do better. He seems to accept that and reminds her of the CFP he sent a while back, strongly encourages her to submit an abstract for a paper she wrote last year. He thinks it has a good shot at being accepted. He reminds her that a couple publications on her CV will greatly increase her chances of finding a visiting professorship after she graduates. She says she'll sharpen up the abstract and submit it that evening. He reminds her also that she has the support of the entire faculty, and if she needs anything, anything at all, she can reach out to him. She thanks him and leaves. She returns to her office. She stares out the window for a long time, watching the rain.

She texts, *I'm sorry*. Anakin doesn't reply.

When she comes by his house, her things are boxed up and waiting for her by the front door. He's washed and folded her clothes, put her toothbrush in a little baggie, has her necklaces and bracelets laid out so they don't get tangled. The dogs seem to know what's going on. They approach hesitantly, and when she slides down the front door onto the ground, they come over and lie in her lap.

Every morning, there's a moment, not even a second, when she thinks Anakin is in bed with her. The next moment: he's not in bed with her because he's up making her breakfast. The next moment: he's not in bed with her. The next moment: he was never in bed with her. The next moment: he'll never be in bed with her again.

She wishes she could be the kind of person who watches a sad movie and eats a gallon of ice cream in one sitting. The kind of person who stops attending to all her responsibilities, stops cleaning her apartment, stops responding to messages. The kind of person who can weep.

Instead there is only a deadly sense of calm as she goes through the motions of each day. As she grades every assignment. As she writes every lesson plan. As she preps for seminar.

As she conducts research. As she buys groceries. As she cooks. As she drives. As she showers. As she breathes. As she breathes. As she breathes.

Her phone vibrates on her nightstand. She glances at her clock—past two in the morning. She picks it up and squints at the screen. A number she doesn't recognize. She thinks about not answering, but then she imagines Anakin overdosing, and even though there would be no reason to call her if something were to have happened to him, she answers anyway. Just in case.

"Hey, Padmé."

She sits upright. "Anakin?"

"Yeah."

She throws off the covers and is already rooting through the hamper to find a pair of pants. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm—I really hate to ask this, but I need bailed out."

"Bailed out? You mean... from jail?"

"Yeah."

Are you using?, she wants to ask. She doesn't. She doesn't want to know the answer.

"How much is bail?"

"A thousand."

She opens her desk drawer and pulls out her checkbook. "Okay."

"You have it?"

Barely. "Yeah."

"I would ask Owen, but..."

"It's okay. I get it. And I owe you for, you know. Car stuff."

A long pause. "Yeah. Okay. See you soon."

Like the rest of the town, the precinct looks like it's stuck in 1976, all wood-paneled walls and ugly old chairs. She goes up to the front desk and gets the attention of a police officer. "I'm here to pay Anakin Skywalker's bail."

The guy looks her over and says, "Do I know you from somewhere?"

"Probably not."

"No, I think I recognize you from TV."

"Will you take a check?"

“You were—” He snaps his fingers. “Something to do with politics. The election.”

She really, really hates cops. “Who do I make the check out to?”

“What are you doing paying Skywalker’s bail? You his mom or something?”

“He’s my nephew. Now please tell me who to make this check out to.”

After the bail is paid, a different officer brings Anakin out from the back and unlocks his cuffs. Padmé can’t get a good look at him. The officer says something about him staying out of trouble. Anakin asks about her alternator. They have a short conversation about her Jeep, with which he is intimately familiar. She tells him she’ll see him once her teenage son inevitably wrecks his brand new Ford Focus.

Padmé finally gets a good look at him. There’s a cut down his eyebrow and dried blood on his face. Cheek swollen and split. Deep bruising across his jaw. She thinks someone else might say, *You should see the other guy*, but he doesn’t, just walks past her out the door. She has a feeling the other guy is in the hospital.

As she’s driving back to Anakin’s, she wonders if he’s high right now. And if he’s high, she wonders if she’s in danger. She can’t stop herself from thinking that at least if he hurts her, he’d be touching her. She makes herself sick.

“Are you—I mean, have you...”

He’s looking out the window, face dark but for the brief flashes of streetlights. She sees his knuckles. Split, raw, bleeding.

“Say it,” he says.

“Have you relapsed?”

“No.”

She’s nearly dizzy with relief. She feels like she can finally breathe.

“Then what happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You dragged me out of bed at two in the morning to pick you up from jail. I teach in six hours. You owe me an explanation.”

He doesn’t seem happy about it, but he complies. “I have this buddy, Rex. Met him in rehab. Alcoholic. When we got out, we agreed that if either one of us got in a bind, we could call the other. Help each other out, no questions asked. I haven’t heard from him in over a year, then tonight he calls me from a bar, drunk, saying he needs a ride home. But when I get there, I can’t find him. The bartender tells me he’s out back. I go out and he’s getting the shit beat out of him by these two punks. At first I was just pushing them, just trying to get them to lay off, but they kept coming at me. They were probably on something. Then I just kind of lost it. By the time the cops got there, they were both in pretty bad shape.”

“Are they...”

“Dead? Probably not.”

“Is anyone pressing charges?”

“Doubt it, since they started it.”

“Well I’m glad you’re okay.”

He huffs a laugh. “I’m not okay, Padmé.”

She pulls into his driveway, hasn’t even stopped the car before he’s saying, “Thanks,” and climbing out.

“Goodnight,” she tries to say, but he shuts the door before she can get the word out.

She watches him go inside. Waits for the living room light to flick on. It doesn’t. Her hand is on the gearshift, ready to reverse, to back out of the drive and go home and somehow get back to sleep. To wake up in the morning alone. To work herself into the ground, because that’s all she knows how to do.

She gets out of the car, goes up to the front door. Her hand hovers over the doorbell but then she decides to try the knob. It’s unlocked. She enters. The only light is coming from the bathroom, and she heads down the hallway to find him at the sink washing the blood off his hands.

He looks over at her, doesn’t seem surprised she’s there. She roots around in the cabinet for iodine and bandages.

“Sit down,” she says.

A different time, he would have said *Yes, Mommy* to rile her up, but now he sits down on the closed toilet lid without a fuss. She starts by wetting a washcloth and wiping all the blood off his face, careful to look anywhere but in his eyes. She moves to the cut down his eyebrow. He hisses when she dabs it with the iodine. She puts a bandage over it and goes to the split across his cheekbone. She can feel him watching her. By the time she moves down to his knuckles, she notices she’s trembling. She hears a hitch in her breath, feels her throat knotting up. It’s like it’s happening far away, like she’s outside her own body. She throws away a bloodied cotton ball and tries to soak another with iodine but she’s shaking too badly. He gently pulls them out of her hands and sets them back on the sink. He holds her hands between his—so torn up, so rough, so gentle. They’ve been inside her. They’ve touched her all over.

She can’t breathe, can only take in these shallow gasps of air.

“Come here, sweetheart,” he says, standing, gathering her into his arms. She buries her face in his chest, grips his shirt in her fists. She grits her teeth. Locks her jaw shut. Swallows down the thick feeling in her throat. He smells like sweat, like copper, like bar smoke.

He runs his fingers through her hair. He whispers it’ll be okay. She feels herself splintering. The sob comes out a scream that tumbles into weeping.

He steps away. She reaches out, tries to pull him back. Then he sweeps her up at the back of her knees. She wraps her arms around his neck, cries against his shoulder. Space moves

around her. A soft bed comes up to meet her. She's engulfed in the smell of him. She's drowning in him. She wishes he would just let her drown.

He's holding her again. Shushing her again. My girl, he says. My beautiful girl. I love you.

Why would he show her kindness after all she's done to him? Why can't he be cruel to her? Why can't she be more like him? The kind of person who comes out in the middle of the night for a guy he met in rehab, who doesn't think twice about stepping up, who feels so strongly about those he cares for, he's willing to take a few punches.

Eventually she wears herself out. Takes in heaving breaths that taper into evenness. The world starts to return, but she wishes it wouldn't.

"I love you." Her voice comes out a rasp, barely audible. "I love you so much, and I—"

"Just rest. I'm not going anywhere."

Minutes pass. A half hour. An hour. She doesn't fall asleep, just feels each second of time tick forward. She presses her ear to his chest and listens to his heartbeat.

When she's as calm and collected as she's going to get, she tries to sit up and he says, "Slowly, slowly."

A headache pulses against her skull. Tears have dried on her face and her skin feels stretched. Once she's upright, she says, "I'm thirsty."

He leaves and returns a minute later with a glass of water. She drinks the entire thing, sets the glass aside, remembers their first date and that he got her water without her having to ask, that she assumed his attentiveness was performed. She cries a little more.

"Do you want to talk?" he asks.

"You said yourself, there's nothing to talk about."

"You seem to have a lot on your mind."

"I feel like I'm walking on broken glass."

"I know."

"Are you hurting?"

"Just as much as you are."

"I don't understand. We love each other. We want to be together. Why can't we?"

He swipes a lock of hair from her forehead, tucks it behind her ear. "Because you're still holding on to a part of you you hate. You're still vain, shallow, selfish, and conceited. You've never actually met yourself. You don't even know who you are."

How can she, when so much of her success depends on what others think of her? When her funding is on the line? When her job prospects will rely on dozens of interviews, full days of university visits? When there are still entire subreddits and Facebook groups devoted to tearing apart every aspect of her life? When people like that police officer still recognize her, no matter how deep into the country she goes? When her parents can take her out of their

wills, leave her with no inheritance? What power does she have? What power has she ever had?

He kisses that place beneath her jaw, the one that feels so good. “What do you want, Padmé?”

“I want you.”

“No, what do you want for yourself? What have you always wanted?”

She’s always wanted a pixie cut. A tattoo. A nose piercing. She’s always wanted to wear a leather bomber jacket, tight t-shirts, jeans with pre-ripped holes in them, big hoop earrings, those ugly little stretchy chokers from the nineties. She’s always wanted to have red nails, because when she was a kid a friend told her that only whores wear red nail polish and so she wasn’t allowed. She’s always wanted to go to the batting cages, to a movie by herself, to ride every roller coaster at an amusement park. She’s always wanted to set something on fire. She’s always wanted to jump off a cliff or out of an airplane. She’s always wanted to write each of her grandparents a letter telling them how much she loves them before they die. She’s always wanted a kitten. She’s always wanted to go to therapy. She’s always wanted to stop seeing herself from the outside all the time, from everyone else’s perspective but her own. She has always wanted. She has always just wanted.

She wants to be able to love Anakin the way he deserves to be loved.

“If I work on myself,” she says, “the way you’ve worked on yourself, if I can learn how to be myself and not... would you want me back?”

“We’ll see.”

She looks at him, chest suddenly full of hope.

“My love for you isn’t conditional, Padmé,” he says. “I’m always going to love you. Always.”

She waits for the “but.” There isn’t one.

“I want to come back to you,” she says.

He holds her hands between his, lifts them and kisses her fingers, her knuckles, so small in his bloodied hands. “I’ll be waiting.”

She’s in Dr. Kenobi’s office talking about comps, which she’ll have to take within the next year. After writing down an entire page of notes and reading recommendations, conversation winds down a bit, and Dr. Kenobi says, “I hear you’ve been doing better.”

“I’m doing gr—” She stops herself. Backtracks. “I’m going through a lot right now. I’m doing my best.”

“You know I have enormous respect for you as a scholar, and I’m very invested in your success. Whatever you might think of me, it’s not my intention to make your life more difficult.”

She slips her notebook back into her bag. “Actually, there’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you.”

“Yes?”

Her hands are clasped between her knees, so tightly her knuckles have turned white. “You know Anakin, from the auto shop?”

“Of course.”

“He and I are—were dating.”

Dr. Kenobi blinks at her. “Oh.”

“I know it’s totally inappropriate of me.”

He gives her a long look. “Is he your student?”

“What? No, of course not.”

“Is he affiliated with this university at all?”

“No.”

“Is he above the age of consent?”

“Yes, but—”

“Padmé, I mean this with the utmost kindness: I don’t care. Who you date outside this university is not my business. Now, if Anakin does decide to apply to the program...”

“He won’t. I mean, he can’t. I lied about that because I was embarrassed he came to visit me at school.” She looks down at her hands. “That’s why we broke up. Well, he broke up with me.”

Dr. Kenobi is making a face she hasn’t seen before, a kind of incredulousness bordering on horror. “Are you telling me he broke up with you because you thought I would think less of you for dating him? Why?”

“He’s younger than me. And he’s not well-educated.” She feels sick as she says it. “And he fixes your car.”

“Do you really think so little of me that I would look down on you for having a relationship with someone of a lower class? You do know I’m a Marxist, right? Not only that, I’ve known Anakin since he was a child. I know he might be a little rough around the edges, and he had a few difficult years after his mother died, but I think very, very highly of him, and I’ve always believed he would make someone a good partner one day. I would have been thrilled to know that person was you.”

It takes all her training in remaining composed under fire not to puke. *I think very, very highly of him.* Of course he does. He was so eager to recommend Lars Auto. He seemed so excited to speak to Anakin that day at the shop. He paid for Anakin’s rehab, his mother’s cremation. He and Anakin are *friends*.

But she couldn’t see that. Because Dr. Kenobi is a well-regarded scholar and a tenured professor with a CV the length of her arm. And Anakin is the guy who changes his oil.

"I'm sorry," she says, but her voice cracks, and she's mortified by how obvious it is she's trying not to cry.

"I can't begin to understand what you went through in your former career. I don't imagine it was anything other than the most arduous work a person could take on. But you don't have to bring the pressures of that part of your life to your work here. Academia may not be known for having a healthy work-life balance, but—and pardon me for being crass—I don't know a single scholar who would give a fuck about your love life."

She nods, her fingernails biting into her palms. She sits there in the silence that follows, unable to look at him, tears involuntarily welling in her eyes. She forces herself to stay, not to run. She's a person. She's allowed to cry. She's allowed to be vulnerable. Dr. Kenobi slides a box of tissues toward her, and she breaks down again.

On her way out the door, calm now, feeling lighter, better, somehow unembarrassed, she stops and turns back to him. "I know I have dissertation hours next semester, but would you approve it if I signed up for a creative writing workshop?"

She makes an appointment with the counseling center on campus. She has no idea what they'll talk about or how exactly they can help, but if therapy has helped Anakin, it can help her.

On Friday, she goes to the batting cages. She thinks she's going to stand out, being a woman alone on a weekday afternoon to hit a few baseballs. No one looks twice at her. Somewhere around pitch twenty, when her arms are sore and her hands are ringing from the impact and her palms are starting to blister, it finally dawns on her:

Her life belongs to *her*. And she can do whatever she fucking wants with it.

On Saturday, she takes herself to a *matinée*. After, she goes to a restaurant and when the host asks how many, she says, "Just me." She orders a glass of wine and the most expensive vegetarian dish on the menu. She reads a book. She doesn't glance around to see if people are looking at her.

On Sunday, she intends to get some grading done, but instead she wakes up early, drives an hour out to Kings Island, and rides every single roller coaster.

She gets an oil change at Jiffy Lube and breaks down crying again. She's been doing that a lot lately. It doesn't feel like being weak anymore.

The leaves begin to turn. She pulls out the fall jacket her sister bought her a few years back, double-breasted, ties at the waist, good for wearing over dresses. She's always thought it was a nice jacket—well-made, warm, has a flattering silhouette. But she hates it. She hates the tiny pockets that don't even hold her phone. She hates that it makes her look smaller.

She gets out a big box and puts the jacket in it. Then she pulls a blouse off a hanger, the one she wore on election day and which she's refused to wear ever since because she thinks it's bad luck. Yes, she won, but it was still the worst day of her life. She screamed into a

pillow when she got home. She threw coffee cups against the wall just to hear them shatter. She slept for fifteen hours.

The blouse goes into the box, along with about five grand worth of suits, skirts, scarves, and shoes. She gets in the car and drops it off to Goodwill.

She invites Charlotte the Medievalist to go shopping. Charlotte seems a little stunned and confused but says sure. They spend the day going to thrift stores and boutiques. Padmé buys everything that catches her eye. Somehow a miracle happens: she finds the bomber jacket of her dreams. It's used, old, ugly, and twenty bucks. It's perfect.

They go to a tattoo place and she gets her nose pierced. It doesn't hurt at all, but she keeps feeling like she needs to sneeze. The piercer holds up a mirror. The little stud glitters in the light.

On their way out, Padmé sees a woman tattooing the most beautiful flowers on a man's forearm. The piercer says the tattoo artist's name is Marianne. Padmé makes an appointment with her for the following weekend.

She finds herself checking the group chat more often in case Anakin says something in it, but he must have told the MFA guys about the situation, and the MFA guys must have told everyone else, because no one mentions Anakin and no one talks directly to Padmé. She expects that to feel painful, but she only feels proud she was able to introduce him to a few friends, these artsy weirdo guys who seem pretentious but aren't, who have taken him under their wing and have likely introduced him to the strange world of contemporary literature, who couldn't give a fuck less about his education or substance abuse issues.

She goes to a salon and gets her hair chopped off. Her head feels light and she can't stop wiggling it around. She takes a selfie and makes an Instagram account. Most of her cohort follow her right away and like her post.

On Halloween, she wears a witch hat to class and brings her students candy. They watch YouTube videos and analyze them.

The tattoo hurts like hell, but she has a good conversation during it, and leaves with her shoulder wrapped in cellophane and Marianne's number, with a promise to hang out sometime.

She buys about a thousand of those ugly fucking chokers.

She goes to a club and gets shitfaced with Marianne, dances all night, sobers up at a Denny's as the sun rises.

She writes four letters, one for each of her grandparents, and mails them out.

It all seems to happen so slowly. And then one morning as she stops in a restroom before heading to class, she looks at herself in a mirror. Bomber jacket with the sleeves pushed up. Pixie cut. Giant hoops. Red nails. Nose stud. Glittery drugstore lip gloss. Choker. T-shirt with the Tootsie Pop owl that says *Wanna lick?* and her tattoo poking out from the collar. Ripped jeans and chelsea boots.

For the first time, she recognizes herself.

When her dad answers the phone, he doesn't seem to realize his camera is on and the first few minutes of the call are spent talking to his ear. Finally she says, "Dad, you're on video."

"Oh." He brings the phone around to his face at the most unflattering angle possible as he searches the entire house for her mother. "Have you bought your tickets yet?"

"Not yet, that's what—"

He locates her mother. They both squeeze beside each other to look at the phone. Her mother squints and says with the dramatic flair of a murder accusation, "What did you do to your hair?"

"I cut it. Do you like it?"

"No! You had such beautiful hair! Why did you chop it off?"

Her dad whispers something about being nice, which is out of character for him. But he does seem to be mellowing out as he gets older. At least, more so than her mother. A few months ago, her mother's dismissal might have sent her spiraling. Now it's just funny and baffling that anyone could have such intense opinions about someone else's hair.

"I wanted to, Mom. I like this a lot better."

She thought she would be nervous to talk to them. Terrified. But she's excited. She's excited to share this news with them, regardless of how they react.

Before her mom can keep arguing, Padmé says, "I have something I've been wanting to tell you."

She used to believe it was impossible to be happy. Then she believed it was impossible to be happy without Anakin. But she is. She still wants him back, wants him to be part of her life, but she also knows that if he never wants anything to do with her again, she'll be okay, and so will he.

She stops at the auto shop on Anakin's day off. Owen looks her up and down and says, "He's not here. And even if he were, I'm not sure he'd want to see you."

"Actually," she says, "I came to ask you something."

She rings the doorbell. There's an inch of snow on the ground and a car she doesn't recognize in Anakin's driveway. The dogs start barking. Maybe he's dating someone new. If so, then—well, it would make this easier at least.

Finally Anakin opens the door. He looks at her, confused. "Uh, can I help you?"

She lifts her sunglasses to the top of her head. "It's me."

It still takes him a moment. Then his eyes widen. “Padmé? What the fuck happened to you?”

“Makeover. Can I come in?”

“Uh. Yeah, sure.” He steps aside. She doesn’t bother taking off her shoes or coat, since this might only take a few minutes. The dogs wag their tails and nose her legs and she bends down to give them each a cursory pat.

“If you have someone over, that’s okay, I can come back later,” she says.

“No one’s here.”

She tries not to feel relieved.

“Whose car is that?” she asks.

“Oh, that,” he says. “It’s Ahsoka’s birthday gift.”

“You bought her a car?”

“I inadvertently acquired a piece of junk that I’m turning into a car.”

“Doesn’t it ruin the surprise, being in the driveway?”

“I could have the Large Hadron Collider in the driveway and she wouldn’t notice.”

He looks good. His wounds are healed except for a faint red line down his eyebrow. She was a little worried he’d relapse, but he seems okay. Healthy. Well-rested. The house is in order. His hair is longer and it looks exceptionally fluffy today. These past few weeks she’s been so steady, but now that she’s in front of him an acute pain wells up in her chest. Not a bad one. Just her body’s helpful reminder that she’s still in love with him.

“Are you okay?” he asks. “Did you leave something here, or...?”

“I wanted to talk to you. Can we sit down?”

“Yeah, okay.”

Anakin leads her into the living room. They sit on the couch. He doesn’t offer her anything to drink, which stings a little. She waits for a moment to see if he’ll say, *You look beautiful today*, but he doesn’t do that either.

“First I want to say that even if you never want to see me again,” she says, “I need you to know that I love you, and I’m proud of you. I admire you so much for your dedication to bettering yourself. You taught me what love looks like. Good love. And I can’t thank you enough for that, for how well you loved me.”

He’s staring at her like there are snakes coming out of her head. She can’t really blame him—she’s never said anything like that before, not unless it was shrouded in some way, side-swept, something he’d have to read between the lines.

She gives him the envelope she’s been holding. “And I wanted to give you this.”

He looks wary. “You paid my bail. We’re even on the car stuff.”

“It’s not money.”

Hesitantly he opens the envelope and pulls out what's inside, takes a moment to read it. "You bought me a plane ticket to Connecticut?"

"I wanted to see if you'd come home with me over break. To meet my family and celebrate Hanukkah and maybe get to see my new nephew. He's due when we'd be there."

"You want to start dating again," he says.

"Not exactly."

He gives her a deadpan look. "Don't tell me you want me to meet your family as a friend."

"No." She pulls a little box out of her pocket. Opens it. "I thought you could meet them as my fiancé."

She watches his face, looks for any sign of anger or disgust. But he only looks stunned, mouth open slightly, as he stares down at the ring.

"I told Dr. Kenobi about us. I told my parents and sister and grandparents too."

"Did you tell the president?"

He's clearly asking that sarcastically, but— "He emailed to ask how I was doing and I mentioned you, yes."

"Jesus christ." He runs a hand down his face. "What do you mean you told them about *us*? What did you tell them?"

"Everything. That I was shitty to you and you broke up with me. That I've been trying to be better and focus on myself. That I was planning to propose to you. I told the entire department too. I'm surprised no one's let it slip."

He stares at the ring for a long time, silent. She wouldn't blame him at all if he told her to get lost. It's a bold move. But Anakin has always been a bold move kind of guy.

"Padmé, this is really a lot to take in. I don't see you for two months and then you show up at my door and propose."

"Like you wouldn't do the same."

He pauses. "Okay, fair."

She inches closer, runs her fingers through his hair. He closes his eyes and lets her.

"I love you, baby," she says. "I love who you are. I love who I am when I'm with you. I didn't realize how much I'd changed while we were together. How you were so good, so kind, so loving, you brought me up with you. I'm sorry it took me so long to meet the version of myself you fell in love with. I'm sorry it took so much heartache to get here."

He stares down at the ring, eyes shining a little more than they were a second ago.

"You can say no, honey. You can take your time. I'll understand."

"Ask me," he says quietly.

She rubs his back, kisses his shoulder. "Will you marry me, Ani?"

He blinks and a tear drips down his cheek. Opens his mouth to answer but nothing comes out. Closes it. Swallows. Finally he nods.

She takes his chin and tilts it toward her, kisses him lightly. He cradles her neck and deepens the kiss, lower lip still trembling. She can feel his tears on her cheek. He licks into her mouth, kisses her like he's starving.

He freezes, pulls back a little. Tries to say something but still can't. Then he hugs her, buries his face into the crook of her shoulder.

She holds him, runs her fingers through his hair. "It's okay, baby. It's okay."

It takes a couple minutes for him to regain his composure, but he finally pulls back, wipes his face with the inside of his wrist. "I love you so much, and I've missed you, and—I thought I was never going to see you again. I hated myself so much. Like, why did I have to make a big deal of it? Why did I ruin the only good thing I've ever had?"

"You didn't ruin anything, honey. You stood up for yourself. You gave me so many chances and I kept messing up. You were right to break up with me."

"It didn't feel right. It felt like agony."

She plucks the ring out of the box and slides it on his finger. "It did for me too. But I'm glad you did it. I'm glad you gave me time to become someone who deserves you."

He stares down at his hand. The ring is plain black on the outside and gold on the inside.

"It's tungsten," she says. "So you don't have to take it off at work. It's basically indestructible."

"I don't have one for you."

She pulls another box out of her pocket and hands it to him. He opens it to a plain gold band she picked out for herself.

"It's just the engagement ring," she says. "You can pick out the wedding ring if you want."

He takes it out of the box, slides it on her finger. They hold hands and look at the rings for a long time.

"Thank you for inviting me to visit your family," he says, "but I can't take off work that long."

She presses a kiss to his cheek. "I strong-armed Owen already. Your calendar is clear."

"We don't have paid time off."

"You do now. I pointed out that you haven't had a single vacation in your life."

"But re—"

She was prepared for him to say this. "Rehab is not vacation."

"I was gone for a really long time."

"Thus proving the shop runs fine without you."

"I don't have luggage."

"We'll buy some."

"I don't have any nice clothes."

"You can wear whatever you want."

"I've never been on a plane."

"First time for everything."

"Your parents are going to hate me."

"I don't think they will, but if they do, I give a grand total of zero fucks."

He stares at her. "Seriously, what did you do? How did you become this?"

She shrugs. "I took your advice. I gave myself everything I'd always wanted, and I realized the world isn't mine to save. I can only be a good person in it, and make life a little better for the people I'm lucky enough to love."

"That's all I wanted."

"I know. And I hadn't noticed I'd already started down that road, just by quitting my job and going to grad school. By getting to know you and seeing how comfortable you are in your own skin, learning I'm allowed to live like that too. I just needed a push to take me the rest of the way."

His eyes trail down her face to her neck. "Is that—" He tugs the collar of her t-shirt. "Did you get a tattoo?"

"Yep."

He takes a deep breath. "It has taken all my willpower not to tell you how fucking hot you look."

"You like it?"

"I love it." He kisses her collarbone. Her shoulder. Her neck. "I know it's not my business, but have you been with anyone else?"

She closes her eyes, sighs when he bites down lightly on her throat. "No. Have you?"

"I could never want anyone but you."

"Look at me, baby. Come here."

He lifts his head and she takes his face in her hands. "We don't have to rush. You can take time to think about this. I hurt you badly, and I'm willing to be patient while I earn back your trust. Last time you swept it under the rug. I shouldn't have asked you to do that. And I'm not asking you to do that now."

He grins like she said something funny. "Padmé, my angel, love of my life. You told the president you were going to propose to me. If that's not proof you've changed, I don't know what is."

“But still, you can be angry with me. I would understand.”

“I gave up on anger a long time ago. I choose to see the best in people. And I forgive you.”

Finally she feels like she can grin back at him. “Oh you sweet, sweet boy. I love you so much.”

He takes her hand, kisses the inside of her wrist. “I love you too.”

“I wish I could be sexy about this, but I’m too excited,” Anakin says, tugging at her shirt. “Show me, show me.”

They’re sitting on his bed. She pulls off her shirt and turns away from him, moving to swipe her hair aside on impulse before remembering it’s not there anymore. She unclasps her bra and throws it on the floor with her shirt.

His fingers lightly trace the lines. “Are these orchids?”

“Yep.”

“And there’s a little key, and a door, and—wait, is this a *Secret Garden* tattoo?”

“It is.”

“This is the coolest shit I’ve ever seen. Are you going to get more?”

“This one hurt a lot, so it might be a while. But yeah, maybe.”

He kisses the inside curve of her shoulder blade and rests his head there a moment. “I’m so happy I feel like I’m dying. You stepped up. I mean, you really stepped up. For me. Because you love me.”

She turns back toward him. “I do love you. I want to spend my life with you.”

“Do you want a big wedding or a small one?”

She presses her forehead against his. “I’m so sorry to say this, baby, but it’s probably going to be an unfathomably huge wedding. My parents wouldn’t let it be any other way.”

He makes an undignified high-pitched noise. “I’ve always wanted a huge wedding.”

“There’s a non-zero chance the president will be there. Basically the government will have to shut down for a day because everyone will be at our wedding.”

“That’s *insane*.”

“I know. But think of the presents.”

“There will be so many presents.” He kisses the corner of her mouth. “You being shirtless is really getting to me. Can we do stuff now?”

She brings his hand to her breast and he runs his thumb over her nipple. “I know our first time back together should be romantic, but I really just want to tie you up and ride you while you beg me to let you come.”

“Excuse you? How is that not romantic?”

It had taken her so long to build up her stamina to Anakin’s level, and she figured their first time back together she wouldn’t last very long, but that’s not the case—this time feels different than all the others, even though the only thing different about it is she doesn’t have to worry about her hair getting in the way. Sometimes she fears her transformation is shallow, in aesthetic only like Sandy in *Grease*. But isn’t that what the problem had been? Appearances?

And yet it feels as though her entire physiology has changed, like she’s been demolished and rebuilt. She never realized that when she was having sex with Anakin, part of her was always a little reserved, always somewhere else. Always afraid to give herself to him completely, believing it all to be temporary, denying herself how she really felt for him.

Anakin has always counted the number of times she comes as some kind of quantitative measure of how good he is, never in a serious way, but he does it nonetheless. But now even he loses count, either because of the truly outlandish number of times she comes, or because he’s too obliterated to remember what numbers are.

He’s so beautiful when he’s bound, chest blushed red and skin glistening. She likes to keep her hand around his neck while she rides him, squeezing only a little, feeling the hum of his throat as he moans, the deep throb of his pulse into her palm.

It’s all *Mommy, please* and *faster, harder, more* and *can I come, I need to come*. It’s all *my sweet baby boy* and *always so good for me* and *let Mommy make you feel good*. It’s shuddering screaming orgasms, nail marks down his chest, sweet pain of thighs and hips straining. It’s afterglow laughter and lying side by side, hands held up together to admire their rings.

Chapter 6

I.

“Padmé,” Anakin says.

They’re still in bed. He’s just gotten her caught up on all the departmental drama she’s missed, and after much prodding, he has finally admitted that yes, a good portion of the department now comes to him for advice, and so he is the center of all gossip in the entire program. To everyone’s credit though, somehow, against all odds, not a single person—not even Mark!—gave any indication to Anakin whatsoever that she was planning to propose. She thinks they’re probably all much kinder people than she ever gave them credit for. The world, in fact, might be much kinder than she ever gave it credit for.

“Uh oh,” she says. “You sound serious. Are you being serious?”

“I told myself that if we ever got back together, there’s something we would have to talk about. And the sooner we get this over with, the better.”

“Oh god, that’s terrifying.”

“Let’s not be looking at each other for this.”

“Okay,” she says, and they both roll onto their backs to stare at the ceiling.

There’s a silence. Anakin is really only ever serious when they’re fighting or when he’s offering one of his many grand declarations of love and devotion. She can’t seem to place this exact flavor of seriousness.

“You know how when we started dating we just dove into the mommy stuff on our first date and never really looked back, and we had this kind of unspoken agreement not to really talk about it?” he asks.

“The unspoken agreement you’re currently breaking? Yes.”

Ah. He was right. Definitely a difficult conversation.

“Well I haven’t talked to my therapist about it either, because I think even in therapy there are *lines*, you know? And so I haven’t really been able to process it. Honestly I haven’t let myself really think about it at all. Not in depth anyway.”

“Okay.”

“So, a few weeks ago, Ahsoka wanted more closet space in the other bedroom, so I started going through some of my mom’s things. And I got rid of most of it when she died but there are a few boxes that seemed special to her and it felt weird going through them because they were private. But I found this box, like a shoebox, and it was just full of every card I’d ever given her. Birthday cards, Christmas cards, Mother’s Day cards... I think I started making cards for her when I was, like, three. Before I knew how to spell, I remember going up to her and very nonchalantly asking how to spell ‘birthday.’ You know, no reason, just curious.”

Padmé only narrowly dodges the intense urge to make a high-pitched noise and kiss him all over his cute little face.

“What I’m trying to say is, the most recent birthday card I could find was when she turned thirty-six. I guess I stopped giving her cards when she got sick. I can’t figure out why. Like, she was still alive. For three and a half of those four years she was sick, she was relatively normal except for chemo brain, but even that only made her a little forgetful, you know?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Just bear with me. This is like, the worst thing I’ve ever said out loud. The point I’m really trying to avoid getting to is that we started dating when you were the same age my mom was when she got sick. And there’s a chance a lot of my attraction to you, maybe even all of it, stems from this desire to pick up where I left off with her. And, like, I’ve always known there was a pretty direct line between my mom’s death and my interest in, you know. But I didn’t know how direct.”

She has no idea what to say to that—what can you even say to that?—so she takes his hand and holds it.

“I started feeling really guilty. Like I was using you for something you didn’t know about or consent to. It’s weird enough I’m in love with someone who’s basically just a kind of meaner, more sarcastic version of my mom, but people get married to people who remind them of their parents all the time. You grow up loving certain personality traits and you seek those traits out in others. But unlike those people, we use that overlap to have great sex, and that’s kind of weird in a way that I think maybe isn’t good.”

“Are you saying you don’t actually love me, you just love your mother and have transferred that love onto me?”

“I don’t... think so? That’s why I wanted to talk about it. I know we just got engaged two hours ago, but in that time I’ve called you Mommy like ten times, so I figured this was a good subject to bring up sooner rather than later.”

For as open as Anakin is, the things he mentions about his mother are mostly anecdotal, factual. For a long time she thought it was because he was uncomfortable talking about his mom, but now she thinks maybe he’s just good at not dumping his problems and feelings onto other people. He is definitely not the kind of person who forces his partner to be his therapist. But still—that’s left her with only a surface-level understanding of his relationship with his mother.

“What was your relationship with her like before she got sick?” she asks.

“Uh. Not super normal. She treated me more like a husband than she did my step dad. Emotionally, I mean.”

“Well that’s a sentence.”

“Right? My therapist called it enmeshment. So I’ve kind of always had mother/son and husband/wife mixed up in my head.”

“Do you want to stop the mommy stuff then?”

A pause. “Yes and no? Probably yes. But it just—it feels so fucking good. Then again, drugs feel good, and I don’t let myself do that anymore.” He looks over at her. “Do you hate me? For maybe not having the greatest motivations for getting into a relationship with you?”

“On our first date, I saw your text thread with Ahsoka where she said I was a mom replacement. So, you know, I knew.”

He leans up on his elbow. “You read my texts?”

“It was the screen that was already up on your phone. I’m hyperlexic, I read entire paragraphs at once. I couldn’t *not* read it.”

“I guess I prefer that to having to actually bring it up to you.” He lies back down. “I was so fucking pissed at Ahsoka for that. Even if she did end up being kind of right.”

“Still. It was a mean thing to say.”

“Somehow it would be less weird if we only did the mommy/baby thing during sex, but it’s like. All the time. For funsies, if you will.”

“I’m willing to try going without it to see if and how it changes things, but I also believe we don’t have to be our best and purest selves all the time.” Anakin goes to interrupt her but she says, “I know you work so hard to be your best self. But the Anakin I love is a filthy, shameless freak who will beat the absolute shit out of anyone who messes with the people he loves. Remember all the guilt you felt when we first started dating and you thought you were being too much?”

He rolls over and smushes his face against her shoulder, says a little miserably, “I’ve always been too much for people.”

“Well you’ve always been just the right amount for me. And maybe this is fucked up, but I don’t really care that I’m your mother-wife. To me it’s just the shape our relationship takes, and as long as we’re not hurting ourselves or anyone else, I don’t think there’s anything that wrong or unhealthy about it. Even if you pursued me with complicated motivations, you don’t have them now.”

“You know, I still have absolutely no idea what you get out of it.”

She cups his face in her hand and kisses the tip of his nose. “I get to take care of my sweet baby boy.”

“Padmé.”

“Oh, right. Big, tough man. Very dominant. An alpha male, truly.”

“*Padmé*,” he says again, but she can tell he’s trying not to laugh.

“This is going to be hard.”

The next morning, Padmé has class, and she has to wake up extra early to go all the way back to her apartment, get ready, and then head back to campus. She wonders if it’s too soon to start bringing her stuff back over.

Wait. They're engaged. Can't she just move in? Can she ask him, or should she wait for him to ask her? Maybe she can just slowly start moving her stuff over and he won't notice.

She thinks about leaving without saying goodbye so she doesn't wake him up, but after she's dressed, she can't stop herself from getting back into bed for a minute to spoon him and kiss his neck and smell his hair.

He makes a little groaning noise. "I missed this so much. Waking up next to you."

"I missed it too, b—sorry. Ani."

"You can still call me baby."

"I shouldn't."

"But I like it."

"Well I like being Mommy, but we agreed to stop that."

He grumbles. "Fine. That's fair."

"I don't want to leave. I want to stay in bed with you all day." She kisses down the back of his neck. "And have totally vanilla missionary sex for hours on end."

"You're not going to make this easy on me, are you?"

She presses her forehead to his shoulder and sighs. "How about this. Let's just give it a week. No mommy stuff for one full week, and we'll check back in and see how we feel."

He turns around to look at her. "That's a really good idea."

"Counterpoint. What if I start calling you Daddy?"

He suddenly looks very serious, like an angry kitten. "Absolutely not."

"What, I can indulge your mommy issues but you won't indulge my daddy issues?"

"You don't have daddy issues."

"One time when I was four I got mad at him and broke his favorite stupid golf figurine, and I wasn't allowed to have ice cream after dinner that night."

"Now whenever you see golf on TV, you have war flashbacks."

"This is my trauma, Anakin, and I'd like you to take it seriously."

"You're terrible," he says, grinning. He looks so sleepy and adorable, and his hair is all messy, and there are pillow crease marks on his face.

She kisses him lightly. "You love me."

"I love you," he says, and she knows she's running late, but she holds him for another few minutes.

She's not huge into checking her Instagram, but last night she took a selfie with Anakin and a picture of their rings, and posted them with just the bride and groom emoji as a caption. Somehow the post has forty likes, even though only thirty-two people are following her. She has several congratulations comments and also one from skyguy99 that says, *YOU HAVE AN INSTA???? SINCE WHEN*. There is also a new follower notification from skyguy99, whose profile picture is a very familiar Mustang.

Anakin doesn't have very many posts but what he does have mostly involves cars. He's only following a couple hundred accounts but for some reason he has three thousand followers. She's scrolling through car stuff, car stuff, then there's a post from summer—a picture of her turned away, walking ahead of him, holding his hand like she's dragging him somewhere. You can only see the curls in her hair and a yellow dress and tan skin. She thinks it was from their second date, right after lunch when she told him they were going to a bookstore and he pretended like he didn't want to go. The caption reads, *Best day of my life*

It has an overwhelming number of likes and comments. She had no idea he was a lowkey Instagram influencer in the online car community. He must post a lot of Stories? Or whatever Reels are?

She follows him back, returns to her own post, and replies to his comment, *Since recently. Love you!* with the kissy face emoji.

It's the end of the semester and she has a ton of work to do, but unlike before, it's easy to get things done at Anakin's house and not beg for his attention all the time. She's on the couch writing the final assignment prompt for her class when Anakin comes home from work.

"Hi, honey," she says.

"Hey." He goes to the bathroom and she hears the shower turn on.

Well that's weird.

She considers it a minute—give him space or check in? It's Anakin, she thinks. He never wants space. She follows him into the bathroom where the shower is running so hot the mirror has already fogged up.

"Can I get in with you?" she asks, already taking off her clothes.

"I don't care," he says.

She gets in the shower where he's facing away, his head under the spray. She wraps her arms around him and presses her cheek to his back. "What's wrong?"

"Just had a bad day."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"No."

That's also weird. Anakin copes with stress by talking through his feelings. He doesn't bottle things up. That's part of the reason he was so forward when they first started dating—

he feels something, he has to say it, or he's miserable. It was strange at first, but she understands that about him now and she admires him for it.

She starts washing his back for something to do. Normally at this point she would be bugging him to trade with her so she could get under the water, but she's not cold and she already showered earlier so really she's just here for moral support. They always tell each other that showering together sucks, and yet they always do it.

"I don't want to talk about it," he says again.

"Okay, that's fine. I won't press."

She can feel him thinking at her. She's not sure what he's wanting her to do.

"I really don't want to talk about it."

"Okay. I believe you."

"If I talk about it, I'm going to want you to say the thing to make me feel better. And I don't want to talk about it so that I won't have to ask you to say the thing. But not talking about it—"

"Why don't you tell me about it and maybe you'll feel better without me saying the thing."

He turns around and rests his forehead on her shoulder. "I'm gonna fucking kill the new guy."

She pets his wet hair. "What did he do?"

Anakin proceeds to go into an extremely detailed saga about the guy Owen hired who's being trained to pick up a few of Anakin's hours while he's on vacation. Anakin has been tasked not only with his own work—which, he says, far exceeds anyone else's, even Owen's—but he also has to train the new guy who is, he says, "a fuckwit." Apparently the fuckwit in question is eighteen, fresh out of high school, and only applied for the job because his parents want him to "build character." And so he's a rich brat with no work ethic. Something something, the fuckwit doesn't do what he's asked, doesn't like to get his hands dirty, something, altercation with Owen, and so on.

"And I was like, you stupid little shit, you think this is meaningless work, but if you fuck up someone's car they could die. Transportation is *important*."

"I'm sorry, honey," she says.

He groans miserably and holds her closer, buries his face in her shoulder. "I really, really want you to say the thing."

"It's been three days. Only four more to go."

"Just once. And we won't tell anybody."

"We don't tell anybody anyway."

"Please?"

"This was your idea."

“Well it was a terrible idea.”

“I tried to tell you that.”

“Not hearing you say it is like not getting stitches when you need them. Like, you’ll heal eventually, but it’ll take way longer.” He sighs. “Just say it. Please.”

She kisses the shell of his ear. “It’s okay, baby. Mommy’s here for you. You’ve been such a good boy today.”

She can feel all the tension uncoil from his body. He turns his head a little and kisses above her collarbone, licks up the water trailing down. “Thank you,” he says, reaching around to finger her a little from behind. “Missed you. Missed this.”

“I can’t emphasize enough that it hasn’t even been”—She gasps as he slides two fingers into her— “seventy-two hours.”

“Let me get you off.”

“You went from sad to horny in like three seconds.”

“You just smell so good. Taste so good. I love you so much. You’re so fucking sexy.”

“You’re giving me whiplash.”

“Just want Mommy so bad.”

“Well now you’re super cheating.”

But it’s useless to keep arguing, because he’s gotten down on his knees.

After the shower sex, and after the after-shower sex, and after the after-sex shower, they’re in bed, worn out, looking at Padmé’s phone together and determining their delivery options. They put in an order at a Mediterranean place within walking distance and pay an exorbitant fee to have it delivered to them.

“Maybe you were right about the mommy stuff,” Anakin says with a sigh. “I just have to interrogate everything, you know? Because everything that’s a natural instinct for me is a bullet point in the DSM. I’m so sick of saying what I think is relatively innocuous shit and my therapist is like, ‘Oh that’s called zehemeralism, a term coined in 1657 by the famous psychologist Jimson Ronaldgate.’”

The voice he uses for his therapist is not flattering.

“It can be hard to figure that out,” Padmé says. “But no matter which way I think of it, I really don’t think the flimsy line we have between mom and girlfriend is that bad, especially since we can talk about it. I mean, unless you think it’s keeping you from processing your grief over your mom.”

“I don’t think so? Grief trauma is different than other trauma. Like I want to get to a place where I think about my overdose and it doesn’t make me despise myself. I want to eventually forgive myself for that. But grieving over my mom—I don’t want that to go away. It’s all I

have left of her. And the fact I still feel that grief while our relationship is what it is tells me that maybe they're not as cleanly tied together as I thought. Does that make sense?"

"I think so."

"I just don't want to love you for the wrong reasons or in the wrong way."

"I know, baby. But some things are always going to be a little wrong. We just have to help each other out as best we can."

"Yeah, you're right." He kisses her shoulder and adds, "One more time before the food gets here?"

And that's the end of that.

II.

The last week of classes. Padmé is on the couch, fielding frantic student emails while Anakin is watching TV. Rather, he's not watching TV so much as staring blankly into space while he plays with his lower lip.

"Hey, Padmé?" he asks.

She sends off one email and opens the next. "Hm?"

"What do your parents do for a living?"

"They're senators."

He covers his face with his hands and groans.

She looks up from her laptop. "They're retired. Does that help?"

"What about your sister?"

"Med school."

"Brother-in-law?"

"I think he's a biochemical engineer?"

"Is there anyone in your family who's a normal fucking person?"

"My nephew Sam started kindergarten this year."

"I've changed my mind. I don't want to go. I'm just going to embarrass myself."

She sets her laptop on the table, scoots over to him, and puts her arm around his shoulders. "I'm going to say something nice to you."

"Don't you dare."

"It's coming."

"Stop it."

“Too late, it’s happening.” She tilts his chin toward him. “Baby, you are so beautiful, and kind, and sweet, and I really, really hate to admit this, but you have the most insane charisma of anyone I’ve ever known, and you would have made a phenomenal politician.”

“Wait, for real?”

“For real. And I guarantee that’s the first thing my parents are going to notice about you. By the end of the trip, they’ll probably love you more than me, just like all my friends do.”

It’s so true he doesn’t even deny it. “You never resent me for that?”

“I love when people love you. All I want is for you to get the compassion you put into the world given right back to you.”

He looks away and covers his face in his hands again. “Oh my god, stop it. Say something mean.”

“The casserole you made tonight wasn’t seasoned very well.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re having a bad hair day.”

“Okay—”

“You kicked me while you were asleep last night and I woke up and kicked you back, and then you woke up just enough to say ‘goddammit, Padmé’ and rolled over.”

“Is that why I have a bruise on my shin today?”

“Your eyebrows—”

“Okay, okay, you’ve humbled me.”

She hugs him and kisses his cheek. “We’re going to have a great time, and you won’t have to worry about anything, okay?”

It’s finals week. Padmé is at the kitchen table, books and notes spread out around her while she works on a paper. Anakin lets in the dogs and brings in a gust of frigid air with them.

Without looking up from her computer, Padmé asks, “Honey, will you do me a favor?”

“Of course.”

“My parents texted me to say something came up and they can’t pick us up from the airport. I’m really swamped, would you be willing to book a rental for us?”

He doesn’t say anything. She finally glances up and he has a look on his face exactly like the grimace emoji. She didn’t think a person’s face could actually do that.

“What?” she asks.

“I really don’t want to upset you,” he says, “but I’m not old enough to rent a car.”

She stares at him.

“You have to be twenty-five,” he says.

She keeps staring at him.

“Sorry?” he says.

She opens a new tab to rent a fucking car.

Anakin’s new suitcase is on the bed. He looks from it, to his closet, back to the suitcase. “I don’t know how to pack a suitcase.”

Padmé is still working on her stupid final paper, which she’s been staring at for so long the sentences no longer make sense and she’s forgotten everything she ever knew about MLA formatting. She’s cross-legged on the bed, wearing his dirtiest hoodie which disgusts him because it smells like motor oil and sweat. But she loves it.

“You just fold up your stuff and put it in there,” she says.

“But like, is there a method?”

“Not really.”

“How do I know what I need to bring?”

“Think about what you use every day. Toothbrush, razor, stuff like that.”

“We use the same shampoo. Are you bringing the shampoo or am I bringing the shampoo?”

“We don’t need to bring shampoo. My parents have shampoo.”

“What about your smoothie blender? How are you going to make your smoothies?”

“My parents probably have a smoothie blender.”

“What about food?”

“We’ll buy food.”

“What about my lotion?”

“You’ll want to bring your lotion.”

“What about sex toys?”

She pauses, looks up at him. “We can’t bring sex toys, baby.”

“Why not? Is it an airport policy?”

“No, it’s just that my bedroom shares a wall with my parents’ bedroom. So we probably won’t be able to have sex at all. Or, I mean, we can, but it’ll make things very, very weird.”

He starts to put back the few things he’d packed already. “I’m not going.”

She closes her laptop, reaches up to him with grabby hands. “Come here, baby. Give me kisses.”

He dives into bed with her like he's been waiting to be invited. They make out for a while, his hand tucked under the hoodie to play with her breasts.

"I can't stand the thought of sharing a bed with you and not being able to fuck you for one night, let alone five weeks," he says.

"It'll be okay."

"You don't know how to be even a little quiet."

"Maybe you can gag me."

"We're too chatty for gags."

"I know."

"And if you're gagged, you won't be able to tell me what a good boy I am and I'll be worried I'm doing something you don't like."

"We'll figure something out." She kisses his forehead. "Let me help you pack, okay?"

He breathes a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

She wakes up in the middle of the night before they fly out. Anakin isn't holding her, which is a rarity. She rolls over to check on him and finds him awake, staring up at the ceiling.

"Baby? What's wrong?" she asks.

"What if the plane crashes?"

"The plane's not going to crash."

"Do you think they'll let me look at the engine? Just to be safe?"

"Honey, you're brilliant, but you don't know anything about jet engines."

He pulls his phone off the charger. "You're right, I'll look it up."

"They're not going to let you look at the engine."

"Even if I ask nicely?"

"Do you want me to make you some tea?"

"No thank you," he says, rolling over onto his side to pull her close, tuck his head under her chin. "I just want you to hold me and tell me I'm good."

She nuzzles her nose and mouth into his hair, kisses his head. "You're such a good boy and I love you so much. You don't have to worry about anything, okay? Mommy's going to take care of you."

"You'll tell me what to do?"

"Every step of the way."

“I wish I could wear my collar. I’d be a lot less nervous.”

“You have your ring.”

“That means something different.”

It’s true, although she hadn’t realized it until now. The rings are a reminder that they’re equal in all respects. They represent hope for a long and happy future together. The collar is an offering, a reminder that they’ve given themselves to each other, that they belong to one another.

“I have an idea,” she says.

When she gets out of bed he makes a sad little sound. They’re staying at her apartment tonight because it’s much closer to the airport. She goes into her closet and pulls down a box from high up, full of junk from when she was a teenager. She had a brief emo phase during which she frequented the mall, and thankfully when she roots around in the box she finds what she’s looking for.

“Give me your hand,” she says as she crawls back into bed.

He lifts his arm to her. She wraps the cuff around his wrist and buckles it. It’s a cheap piece of junk, not even real leather, but it’s something. It has a D-ring so she can hook her finger in it and guide him around.

“When’d you get this?” he asks, inspecting it.

“A long time ago. You would have probably been a toddler.”

“An antique.”

She shoves his shoulder. “Shut up.”

“It doesn’t look weird?”

“I don’t think you know this about yourself, but you’re basically the definition of punk. The fact you don’t know you’re punk makes you even more punk.”

“How can I be punk? I’ve never been to a concert.”

“Punk isn’t just about music. It’s a state of mind. The point is, your attitude, the way you look, no one’s going to look twice at you wearing old Hot Topic junk.”

“Hot Topic. Jesus, you’re ancient.”

“I like to think of myself as a cougar.”

He snorts a laugh. “Okay, you’re not that old.”

“In another life, I’m a rich divorcée and you’re my stunning young pool boy.”

“An adulteress corrupting her son’s best friend.”

“A lonely widower hiring a male escort to keep her company.”

He leans over to mouth above her collarbone, nip at the sensitive skin there. “I’d be your filthy little rentboy.”

She nudges her hand into his boxers and strokes his cock, half hard already. "I'd fall in love with you but wouldn't be allowed to have you beyond the transactive nature of our relationship."

"I'd let you buy me pretty things and tell myself it's not real love, you're just my client."

They had sex just a few hours ago, kind of a marathon hoping to get it out of their systems before their trip.

"You want to go again, baby?" she asks.

He exhales a "please" and she climbs on top of him, gets a condom from the bedside table and rolls it over him. She doesn't bother taking off her underwear, just tugs it to the side and sinks down. He grips her thighs hard enough to bruise.

She leans down and kisses him, holds still so he can fuck up into her the way he likes. They have to be up in a couple hours anyway, and she has a feeling they're not going to go back to sleep.

They're in an obnoxiously long TSA line, obnoxiously early for their flight. It's still dark outside. Mark was kind enough to drop them off at the airport, and even though he's little more than an acquaintance to Padmé, he hugged Anakin like he was parting with his soulmate. She really thought he was going to cry.

Once they got inside, she realized she forgot to tell Anakin about checking luggage. He went into a minor panic about having to hand over all his stuff. The woman behind the counter was very kind as she explained exactly how luggage transfer worked, and eventually he chilled out about it.

For a carry-on, he has his high school backpack, and she has a very hard time not telling him how cute he is. At some point when he was a kid, he drew the anarchy symbol on it in silver Sharpie.

"Why is everyone taking off their shoes?" he asks.

"They're checking for bombs."

"In my shoes?"

"You're too young to remember the shoe bomber."

"Was it bad? Like was anyone hurt?"

"I don't think so. I think they caught him before it could detonate."

"So you're telling me they've been making people take off their shoes at the airport for twenty years because of one failed bombing, but we can't have gun control after like a million shootings?"

"That is correct."

"What the fuck is wrong with this country?"

“I’ve asked myself that question every single day of my life.”

“This whole setup really looks like something from a dystopian sci-fi movie.”

She tries to look at the security checkpoint from the perspective of someone who’s never seen anything like it before. The luggage belts. The scanners. People getting patted down. He’s right, it’s weird.

“I don’t have to take off my ring, do I?” he asks.

“No, you’re fine.”

“Good. I’d probably burst into tears.”

They get to the front and Padmé hands over her ticket and ID. The guy looks them over, looks her over, and hands them back, expressionless. Padmé gets a few bins to put on the belt before she realizes Anakin isn’t behind her, and when she looks back, she sees him laughing and chatting with the TSA agent. She’s been on hundreds of flights in her life, and she has never once laughed or chatted with a TSA agent.

She hears him say, “Alright, man, take it easy,” and the agent says, “You too, man,” and Anakin catches up with her.

“Do you know him?”

He looks at her like that’s a ridiculous question. “No.”

How does he do that? How does he make everyone just instantly fall in love with him?

“What do we do now?” Anakin asks.

“We wait,” Padmé says. They’re at their gate, which is still full of people for the flight going out before theirs. “You’re the one who wanted to get here two hours early.”

“That’s what the internet said to do.”

“I can’t believe you trust a BuzzFeed article more than your own girlfriend.”

“Fiancée. And it was WikiHow.”

They have a nice seat at least, looking out over the tarmac while the sun rises. She holds his hand. He rests his head on her shoulder.

“You don’t look around anymore,” he says.

“What do you mean?”

“You used to look around all the time to see who was staring at us. People have been staring all morning and you haven’t even noticed.”

She scrolls through her Instagram feed. “They can go fuck themselves. Anyone who sees me with you and doesn’t immediately think ‘girl, get it’ isn’t someone I want to know.”

“When we were at the dentist last week, I called you the M-word on accident and this lady overheard and gave you like the worst death glare. Not only did you not notice her, you didn’t

even notice I'd used the M-word in public."

"I have no recollection of that."

He snuggles closer. "I'm going to love being your himbo trophy husband."

"You're too smart to be a himbo."

"When we're in the air, am I going to be able to see the lines between states?"

They board the plane. She makes it all the way to coach before she realizes once again Anakin isn't following her. When she looks back, he's staring into the cockpit looking mesmerized and everyone behind him is pissed.

She rushes back and grabs the D-ring of his cuff to pull him along. "Come on, baby, you can't hold up the line."

"I'm changing my career. I want to be a pilot."

"We'll talk about it once we're in our seats."

"Do you think they'd let me hang out in there?"

"No."

"Nobody told me planes were just big cars with wings."

"I don't think that's accurate, honey."

She gets to their seats and puts her carry-on in the overhead bin. She goes to sit down and Anakin says, "I want the window seat."

She sighs, gets back up while Anakin is putting his carry-on beside hers. Finally they get situated and Padmé feels like she's aged ten years. Anakin looks out the window for a long time at the luggage carriers loading up the airplane. Then he goes through the seat pocket, flips through the magazine, finds the barf bag.

"Is this for if you have to puke?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Have you ever puked on a plane?"

"No."

"Do you think I'm going to puke?"

"I doubt it."

He puts it back and finds the emergency procedures card. He reads down the first side, turns it around, reads the back. His eyes are huge. "This is what happens if we crash?"

She squeezes his thigh. "It's not going to happen."

"Then why is there a laminated card telling us what to do if it does happen?"

“The same reason buildings have fire extinguishers. They just need to be there. It doesn’t mean you’ll have to use them.”

He puts the card away, leans back, looks out the window again.

She glances at her phone and says without thinking, “I wish I could give you a Xanax or something.” She grits her teeth as soon as it’s out of her mouth. When is she going to stop saying shit like that? “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, unfortunately I’m a big fan of Benzos.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’m just not used to having anxiety.”

She thinks for a moment, then decides to pull out the big guns. “I have an idea.”

“You always have an idea.”

She roots around in her purse. “It’s my job on this trip to make sure you’re comfortable.”

“You’re going to make a great mom one day.”

“I’m already a great mom.”

It takes him a moment. “Right. Glad we can joke about our sick fetishes in public.”

She plugs her ear buds into her phone and gives one to Anakin, who slots it in his ear. She puts the other in hers. Then she goes to YouTube, types in her own name, and finds a video with the title *WATCH: Former FOX News Editor OBLITERATED by Democrat Campaign Manager Padmé Naberrrie*. She hits play.

“Oh my god,” Anakin says. “You can’t show me porn in public like this.”

“Just watch.”

It’s not a huge deal, just a five-minute clip of her arguing with a guy on FOX a few years ago. She’s amiable for a while, nodding and listening to this asshole reporter, and then she starts interrupting him with rebuttals before he can even finish making his points. When he tries to get a word in, she talks over him. Then the finale, the reason this was clipped and posted on the internet in the first place: the phrase “...the dipshit raging narcissist Republicans spinelessly running this country.”

“Wow,” Anakin says. “That guy didn’t stand a chance.”

“You want to watch another?”

“How many of these are there?”

“A lot. They found out I was good under fire and kept making me do news spots. I was an internet meme for a while I think.”

“You were? How come I’ve never seen it?”

“I think you were, uh, busy at the time.”

“Oh. Right.”

Based on her understanding of his timeline, he would have been in rehab through most of the election. She pulls up another video, and another, and eventually everyone on the plane is boarded and the flight attendant tells them to turn off their phones.

“Thank you for showing me those,” Anakin says. “From now on when I get anxious I’m just going to watch you decimate Republicans.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever been grateful for being briefly famous.”

He squeezes her hand as they begin taxiing and the flight attendant goes over the emergency procedures. Anakin listens like he wants to take notes. Finally they reach the runway. The engines rev up and they start to pick up speed.

“You should look out the window,” she says. “You’ll really like it.”

They lift off. Anakin, staring out the window, whispers, “Holy shit, this is amazing,” and then he’s quiet for a long time as the ground falls away beneath them.

He nearly climbs over her to look into the aisle. “What’s that lady doing?”

“That’s the snack cart, baby.”

“We get *snacks*?”

“What if it doesn’t show up? What if someone takes ours by accident?” Anakin asks.

They’re at baggage claim, where he’s looking intently at every suitcase that slides past.

“Happens all the time,” she says.

He finally looks away from the carousel to stare at her in horror. “If it happens all the time, how is this possibly the most effective system for handling luggage?”

“It usually works out. The airline finds it sooner or later.”

“From now we’re driving everywhere.”

III.

They pull into the driveway of her parents’ house. She never really thought much about the house, but now, seeing it from Anakin’s perspective, she has to admit it’s a bit... large. And it doesn’t help it’s tucked into a quiet area in the woods, away from the main road.

“I’m going to puke,” Anakin says. “I’ve never been in a house this big in my life.”

“It’s just impressive from the outside. Inside it’s just a normal house.” She glances at her phone, has a text from her mom saying they’ll be home soon. “And look, they’re not even here right now. You can have your mental spiral in peace.”

Padmé gets her purse and carry-on, and Anakin “one trip or die trying” Skywalker gets the rest of the luggage. She puts in the door code and they go inside.

“You *lied*,” Anakin says, staring up at the vaulted ceilings and the chandelier hanging above the foyer. “This is like something from a movie about rich people.”

She’s already making her way upstairs. “Come on, let’s make out for a bit before my parents get home.”

He follows her up the stairs and down the hallway, pausing periodically to look at the pictures on the walls. He stops at Padmé’s senior photo. “Oh my god, you’re so fucking cute. You have *braces*.”

“Stop that,” she says, grabbing his hand and pulling him away.

“If we were the same age and went to high school together, I would have had a huge crush on you.”

“No way, I was the biggest nerd on the planet.”

“Let me guess. Student body president?”

“Yep. Also president of the debate club. Also France in Model UN.”

“That’s so hot.” When they finally get to her room, he asks, “Jesus Christ, how many bedrooms does this place have?”

“Six bedrooms, four bathrooms.”

“Wait, isn’t it just your parents who live here?”

She takes her suitcase out of Anakin’s hand and enters her bedroom. “Yep.”

“Why would you need this much space for only two people?”

“Not to sound like a snob, but I’ve honestly never asked myself that before, so I have no idea.”

“Whoa,” he says, stepping inside and setting down the luggage. He immediately goes to the bay window looking out into the forest. ‘No wonder you love reading, you have a *nook*.’ She feels a little self-conscious as he wanders over to the bookshelves. “You have Harry Potter. And Twilight. And Stephen King. I think we might be in the wrong room.”

She sits on the edge of her bed. “Shut up.”

“You’re a year and a half out from having a *doctorate* in *literature*, and your bookshelf looks like the mass market paperback section of a grocery store.”

She throws a bolster pillow at him. “You’re so mean!”

“It’s your fault for making me well-read.” He opens the door to the en suite bathroom. ‘You have your own bathroom? Wait, is that a jacuzzi?’ He glances back at her. “You have a jacuzzi in your bedroom, Padmé.”

“Are you going to keep making fun of me or are you going to fingerfuck me while we have some alone time?”

He doesn't need to be asked twice. He pushes her back onto the bed and kisses her, unbuttons and unzips her jeans, slides his hand into her underwear.

"You're already wet for me and I didn't even do anything," he says.

"Being with you in my room does something for me."

"I bet. Thinking about all the stuff you never got to do in here. Making up for lost time."

"We're not going to make it through this without having sex, are we?"

"Not a fucking chance."

He's so good with his hands. It only takes a few minutes to get her worked up. Just as she's about to come, she hears the squeal of the back door opening. She claps both hands over her mouth to stifle the shout she makes. Anakin slips his hand out of her pants and says, "Noisy," before shoving his fingers in his mouth.

"This wouldn't be a problem if you didn't make me come so hard," she hisses. "Be worse at sex and maybe I'll be quiet."

"Padmé?" her mom calls from the bottom of the stairs. "Are you here?"

"Fuck," she says, zipping up her pants while Anakin goes to wash his hands. She rushes out of the bedroom and meets her mom at the bottom of the stairs. Her mom looks basically exactly like her, just a little older. Her hair is just as dark and curly, and honestly despite her best efforts she still more or less looks like she's living in the eighties, an impression that's not at all improved by her gold-plated, bauble-like earrings.

"Hi Mom," Padmé says as she hugs her mother.

Her dad comes up next, arms outstretched, and says, "How was the trip?"

Dormé takes more after their father, who is tall and angular and white-haired. He used to wear polo shirts and khakis, looked at home around all his nearly identical politician buddies, but in retirement he seems to be indulging more in his own interests and so he's always wearing gaudy Hawaiian shirts and seems to be trying to grow a goatee. Recently he purchased an acoustic guitar, which he's teaching himself to play by watching YouTube videos.

Padmé hugs him next. "It was fine. No problems at all." She pulls away and is about to say something about how the airline they flew doesn't have those cookies she likes anymore, when she notices both her parents are staring up at the stairwell as Anakin comes down, a kind of awed look on both of their faces.

Padmé desperately wants to say, *I understand. I had the same reaction.*

"It's good to meet you, Senator Naberrie," Anakin says, shaking her mother's hand. 'Senator Naberrie,' he says to her father, and shakes his hand too. "Thanks so much for inviting me to stay with you. It really, really means a lot to me."

Of course Anakin would dive right into sincerity. If her parents are thrown for a loop by his appearance, they're going to flip their shit when they figure out he's just exactly who he is literally all the time.

Her mother recovers first. "Please, call me Eva. And this is Greg."

Meanwhile, to his credit, her dad's eyes aren't exactly the size of dinner plates, more like tea saucers. He finally clears his throat and says, "We're glad to finally meet you."

There's a strange beat of silence that Padmé has never experienced with her parents before, who are usually so socially deft that conversation with them moves like a TV script.

"Can I help with the groceries?" Anakin asks.

Since it's late, they put together sandwiches for dinner. Padmé and Anakin go to sit down at the table first while her parents take a minute alone in the kitchen, probably to share their thoughts about Anakin. Meanwhile, Anakin keeps looking at the table like, why are there so many place settings?

He leans close and whispers, "Why is there a plate already on the table?"

"That's a charger. You put your plate on top of it."

"Where are the napkins?"

She points to the blue cloth folded neatly beside his place setting. "Right there."

"I don't want to use the fancy napkins."

"That's what they're for."

"But then it'll need to be washed."

She hates having to say this. "We have the laundry sent out."

He stares at her. "Are you going to tell me you have a maid too?"

She purses her lips.

"Padmé. I knew your family was well off but I didn't know you were *filthy fucking rich*."

"Those things don't actually cost that much."

She thinks she sees his eye twitch.

"So, Anakin, I hear you like cars," her dad says after they've joined Padmé and Anakin at the dinner table, by which she means, recovered from the shock of meeting their extremely good-looking, extremely kind, extremely weird future son-in-law. "What kind of car do you drive?"

Even though they haven't eaten much today, Anakin still seems nervous and is only poking around at his potato chips. "A '75 Mustang II."

"Good car. What kind of engine does that have?"

Padmé is intensely grateful for her father's talent in pretending to know a lot about things he actually knows nothing about, paired with Anakin's ability to talk about complicated

things in a compelling way. He says it has a Windsor V8 engine and goes on to talk about the C-4 automatic transmission, and that smoothly transitions into the 1973 oil crisis when the Mustang II was introduced, and from there the conversation moves to politics, specifically climate change and corporate regulation proposals thereof, a topic that in most households might be taboo at the dinner table, but in the Nabberie household makes everyone far more relaxed.

After a long evening that wasn't nearly as awkward as Padmé was fearing, and upon realizing she's actually exhausted, she bids her parents goodnight and excuses herself to her bedroom. Anakin follows.

"How was I?" he asks the moment the door is closed. "Did I embarrass you?"

She wraps her arms around him. "No, baby, you were perfect. They love you."

"I don't think so. Did you see the way they were looking at me?"

"They've just never met anyone like you before. They were a little surprised is all. That and the way I look now, I think they just weren't ready for it. But they'll be fine."

He takes a deep breath. "I don't think I can talk politics for five weeks."

"When in doubt, just mention prison abolition and you won't need to say another word for a whole hour."

"Are they for or against?"

"It's one of the few issues they're not sure about, and it makes them deeply insecure. It's like if someone had a car problem you didn't know how to fix."

"I'm no expert, but I think motor vehicles and the prison-industrial complex are two very different things."

Padmé didn't realize how much sleep she'd lost these past few weeks. She ends up sleeping nearly twelve hours, wakes up close to eleven. Anakin isn't in bed with her and she briefly panics—did he brave her parents by himself?

When she goes downstairs, she can't find anyone. There's half a pot of coffee waiting for her and she pours herself a cup. She hears her dad laughing from somewhere outside. She finds him on the deck, sitting in one of the adirondacks with a cup of coffee in hand. And he's laughing hard at something—his real laugh, not his politician laugh, which is rare. And there's Anakin right beside him with his own cup of coffee, talking animatedly about something, wearing the nice cardigan she bought him. It's December but it's been unseasonably warm outside, like it's still early October. They have their backs to her. She can't see Anakin's face to tell if he's in distress and she should come save him.

Despite her best efforts, not only was she not able to finish all her grading before flying out, she had to ask for extensions on her papers too, which puts her firmly behind on her work. Unlike last semester, this isn't so much a sign that she's spending too much time with

Anakin as it is her newfound unwillingness to work herself into the ground. In the case of this semester, there was simply too much to do and not enough time to do it in without sacrificing her health.

Much later, Anakin finds her in her bedroom, on her bed, books and notes spread out all around her. He kisses her temple and says, “Morning, babe,” even though it’s past noon. He starts rummaging through his suitcase.

She wrenches her attention away from her laptop. “Have you been hanging out with my dad all morning?”

He checks the alarm clock by her bed. “Oh. Yeah, I guess so.”

“And? Have you taken any damage? Are you mortally wounded?”

“He’s taking me to something called a clubhouse.”

“What? Why?”

He shrugs. “I told him I shoot pool and he’s like, well let’s go shoot pool. I’m guessing there’s a pool table at the clubhouse, but I don’t get what club it’s for.”

“It’s a golf club. How *do* you know how to play pool?”

He glances up and away. “Uh, I can’t think of a lie fast enough, so I’ll just tell you. One of my dealers had a pool table. I played a *lot* of pool during the dark years.”

“How long are you going to be gone?”

“No idea. He also wants me to take a look at his buddy’s car. Apparently the guy’s mechanic fucked it up somehow.”

“But... I thought we could spend some time together?”

He makes a gesture to the mess she’s made of the bed. “You have a ton of work to do. I’m staying out of your hair and keeping your dad out of it too. The second you submit final grades, I’m all yours, okay?”

She has dinner alone with her mom that night and they talk for a long time, mostly about politics, and Padmé is surprised to find she’s fallen very behind on the news. She’s also surprised by how cordial her mother is being, which is freaking her out a little bit. Not one mention of her hair or piercing or tattoo. Or the fact she’s dating a twentysomething blue collar Ohioan. She’s not complaining—if her mom only wants to talk politics the entire trip, that’s fine with her.

Later, she’s in bed reading, thinking about going to sleep early, when her dad and Anakin finally come home. Downstairs, she can hear her dad ask Anakin if he wants something to drink, and Anakin says, “I’m beat, man, I think I’m just going to head to bed,” and her dad laughs and says, ‘Alright, see you tomorrow, kid,’ and Anakin says, “Night, Greg.” A moment later, he comes into her room, shuts the door, and falls down face-first on the bed.

“For an old guy, your dad is exhausting,” he says.

She leans down to kiss his head. Sniffs him. “Why do you smell like beer?”

He rolls onto his back. “I had the first beer of my life. And hopefully the last.”

“You didn’t like it?”

“Absolutely fucking not. But I wasn’t about to tell your dad I’m sober. He’s one of those guys who orders a whiskey, neat. And I’m the kind of guy who’s like, if it can’t go up my nose I’m not interested. The last thing I want is your dad asking me how to get his hands on some coke.”

“Please don’t coke up my father.”

“The guy is fucking wild. At this rate, I wouldn’t be surprised if he offered me a bump in the bathroom of a drag bar.”

“You and I have a vastly different experience of my dad.” She runs her hands through his hair, scratches his head. “Is drinking against the rules or something? Like is it considered a relapse?”

“I had a glass of wine with you on our first date. It’s really not a big deal. I don’t think I’m ever going to like alcohol or being drunk enough for it to become a problem.”

“Are you buzzed?”

He does a so-so hand gesture. “I can see the appeal I guess. Heroin is better.” He pauses. “Sorry. I try not to say things like that.”

It’s definitely a jarring statement, but she’d never keep him from saying what’s on his mind. “It’s okay.”

“I miss it. I really, really miss it. I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t admit that. But I’m not going to be able to go to an NA meeting for over a month. That’s where I say all this shit so you don’t have to hear it.”

“It’s really okay. I want to be here for you.”

“I don’t want to freak you out.”

“You won’t freak me out.”

He puts a hand over his eyes and then pinches the bridge of his nose. “Today was like, that thing you used to do where you’d look at me and it feels like you can see every thought in my head and you’re judging me for all of them. But with you it’s hot because it made me want to ask you to step on my throat. Your dad though—he’s ten times worse about it. I feel like I’m being tested. And I suck at taking tests.”

“Believe me, I know the feeling.”

“I understand you so much better now. Like no fucking wonder you were so hung up on appearances and shit. I felt like I was on stage all day. He was so nice about everything but I kept thinking, like, one wrong move and it would be all over for me, and yet I had absolutely zero evidence to think that and I thought I was going crazy.”

“He’s chilled out a bit in his old age at least.”

“*That’s* him chilled out? Your childhood must have been miserable. Christ, I get it now. You’ve spent your entire life in this household where you were always looking for the right answer instead of the true answer. *That sucks.*”

“I’m not worried what my parents think of you. Even if they do hate you, what’s the worst that could happen?”

“Weren’t you expecting them to help out with the wedding? What if they decide not to?”

She shrugs. “Then we’ll go to the courthouse and have a wedding when we’re more financially stable. I’m not going to let my parents have that kind of hold over me anymore.”

“You really don’t care if we have a courthouse wedding?”

“We could do a drive-thru wedding in Las Vegas for all I care. The only thing that matters is that I’ll be married to you.”

He makes a pitiful sound. “I want to fuck you so bad when you say shit like that. It’s not fair.”

“Let’s go to bed, honey. You need your rest for whatever my dad cooks up for you tomorrow.”

A couple days later, Padmé gets out of the shower and finds her computer isn’t on the bed where she left it. She’s reaching crunch time now, the interval where it seems physically impossible to finish her work. Thankfully Anakin has been keeping her parents busy. She isn’t sure where her mother stands yet, but her father is, to put it lightly, enamored.

She gets dressed and looks for where she might have put her laptop. It’s not like her to misplace a giant fucking MacBook her parents begrudgingly bought her when she started her master’s degree, but also, when she’s this stressed out she has a tendency to lose track of things. She wanders out of her bedroom and downstairs, where no one is around. Anakin was right—there’s absolutely no reason her parents should be living in a house this big. In the garage, her mom’s car is missing, so she probably went somewhere, but her dad’s is still here which means he’s probably in the rec room playing Madden, which is apparently a thing he does now.

She hears the light clacking of keys and goes into the study to find Anakin at her father’s desk, face screwed up in concentration as he reads something on her computer.

“Honey, what are you doing with my laptop?” she asks.

He glances up, wide-eyed. “Uh. Nothing. Wow that was a fast shower.”

She tries to move around him to look at the screen but he keeps spinning the chair.

“You didn’t even ask,” she says, still going around him.

“It was just for a minute.”

“This is why you should get your own computer.”

“I would never use it.”

“Because you’re always using mine. Did you close any of my tabs?”

“You mean one of the eight million you have open? No.”

“It’s *research*.”

He clicks out of whatever he was looking at and closes the laptop.

“I can just look at the browser history,” she says.

“I was incognito.”

“You didn’t look at my history did you?”

“No, I didn’t. Wait, what do you have in your browser history? Porn?”

He goes to open the laptop again but she snatches it away from him.

“Why would I need porn when I’m engaged to the hottest man alive?”

“I know that’s a compliment, but you really made it sound like an insult. What’s in your browser history?”

“Gifts maybe?”

“You’re buying me a gift? I get a Hanukkah gift? I didn’t think we were doing gifts.”

“Why were you on my laptop, Anakin?”

He slumps like she shot him or something. “I was looking up what qualifications I would need to become a pilot.”

She stares at him for a long time. He’s never said anything like this before, not seriously anyway, never gave any indication he was interested in doing something else with his life. He’s never even given any indication he wants his GED. His only aspirations have been to marry her and have kids, which is fine with her. The entire history of humanity has relied on people with such aspirations.

“You don’t have to look at me like that,” he says. “I know it’s a stupid idea.”

“I think it’s an amazing idea.”

“Really?”

“Baby, you could back up an eighteen-wheeler through the eye of a needle. You know what...” She gets out her phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Texting my dad to see if he knows anyone with a plane.”

“What? Also, he’s like twenty feet away.”

A moment later, her dad comes in. “Yeah. Why?”

“Would they be willing to take Ani flying?”

He shrugs. “As long as the weather holds, I don’t see why not.”

"Guys," Anakin says.

"What?" Padmé and her dad say.

"Okay, first of all, you two are creepily alike. Second, please don't go out of your way for me. This is just a really stupid—"

But it's too late, her dad's already on the phone, walking away, saying, *"Hey, Bill, got a favor to ask."*

The next afternoon, with the house completely empty for once, Padmé finally pulls ahead in her marathon of work. It's three in the afternoon, but she decides to take a break to get dressed, when Anakin and her dad get back. She's in her bra and underwear, figuring out what shirt to wear that will irritate her mother the most when Anakin comes into the room, shuts the door, and locks it.

"Hey, how was—"

He takes her by the back of the knees and flips her roughly onto the bed, kisses her hard. He tugs her hair, pulls her head back, mouths down the length of her throat.

"Baby, what are you—"

"I love you. I love you so fucking much." He pushes down the cup of her bra and starts sucking at a nipple.

"My dad's home."

"He's on a phone call. Please let me eat you out. Need to taste your pussy. Please."

"Anakin."

That gets his attention. He looks down at her, wild-eyed, a little breathless. She cups his face in her hands. *"Talk to me. How did it go? Did you like flying?"*

"I want to do it for the rest of my life."

She squeals a little in delight. *"I'm so happy for you, baby."*

"Really? You really think I can?"

"I think you can do anything."

"It's going to be hard. And it'll take a long time. And if it works out, I might be gone a lot. And I'll miss you."

"It'll be worth it to do something you love."

"I love fixing cars."

"And I love politics. We don't have to do one thing forever."

He rolls off her onto his back. *"I want to wait until you've found a job. A permanent one, not one of those visiting professorship one-year contracts you were telling me about."*

“That might be years, honey.”

“I can wait. We have a lot going on anyway. And if I’d gone to college when everyone else my age did, I would have only graduated, like, last year.”

Padmé mentally files that under “shit Anakin says that makes her feel ancient.”

He ticks things off on his fingers. “Wedding. Job. House. Babies. Maybe not in that order, but I’m just saying. We’ve got a pretty long to do list.”

She rolls over to straddle his hips and starts tugging off his shirt. “Speaking of babies, let’s get back to what we were doing and hope my dad minds his business.”

It felt like it took an eternity, but Padmé’s papers are in and she’s submitted final grades. She’s free. She’s finally free. She thinks she should celebrate, maybe by sitting on Anakin’s face for a while. But when she goes to look for him, she can’t find him anywhere. He usually tells her when he’s going out, and she’s been distracted all morning but she thinks she would have remembered him kissing her goodbye. She looks through every room in the house, which takes forever. Finally she gets on her shoes and goes outside. Anakin’s never been a wilderness person, but it’s a nice day out and there are plenty of hiking trails. Just as she reaches the forest line, she hears this *ka-thunk ka-thunk* noise off in the distance. She walks toward it, all around the house, and finds Anakin on top of the garage. With a nail gun.

She shields her eyes from the sun. “Ani, what are you doing on the roof?”

“Hey, babe,” he calls down. “I’m just fixing a few shingles.”

“Why?”

“Your dad asked me to.”

“Why can’t he just hire someone?”

“No need to pay a guy to come out for a couple shingles. I’ll be done in a minute.”

She lets it go. Anakin likes to stay busy and he likes to be helpful. It’s probably not a big deal. But the next day, she finds him in the garage beneath her mother’s car.

“What are you doing now?” she asks.

He rolls out from under it. “Your mom asked me to take a look at her car.”

“Why can’t she just take it to the shop?”

“It’s just a loose belt, and I mean, I’m right here. It’ll only take a minute.”

Later that afternoon, she finds him under the kitchen sink.

“Let me guess,” she says, “the garbage disposal isn’t working.”

“It’s working. It’s just not working well.”

Over the next few days, she finds him cleaning the gutters. Fixing a drippy faucet. Rewiring an outlet. Replacing the A/C filter. Reorganizing the furniture in her parents’

bedroom while her mother points at where it should go. When she sees him putting down tarp in the den so he can paint it, she finally pulls the plug.

"You're coming with me," she says, grabbing his wrist and dragging him to the family room, where her parents are watching television.

"My fiancé is not your employee," she tells them.

"What do you mean?" her dad says.

"You've been making him fix every broken thing in this house."

"But he's so good at it," her mom says.

"I don't care if he's good at it, he's supposed to be on vacation. *Relaxing.*"

Anakin says, "Babe, it's really not a—"

"You were about to paint the den, honey."

"It's been needing a new coat for years," her dad says.

"Then do it yourself or hire someone. Don't make a *guest* in your *home* do labor for you."

"It's really the least I can do," Anakin says. "And I like being useful."

"Ani, it's very sweet of you to want to help my parents, but one, they invited you here and so it's rude of them to ask you to do work, and two—" She glares at her parents. "They're loaded, and they can afford to pay a professional."

"In our defense," her dad says, "he does better work than professionals."

Anakin grins. "Thanks, Greg."

"I don't care," Padmé says. "He's not doing any more work for you. He's going to relax and enjoy his vacation."

She grabs Anakin's hand and moves to leave. He says to her parents, "But really, if something breaks or whatever—"

"*Anakin.*"

While Padmé's father became president of the Anakin Skywalker fanclub after knowing him for about twelve hours, her mother is a little slower about joining. But then she and Anakin go on a shopping trip so he can pick out a present for Padmé, and when they return, Padmé is maybe a little concerned that her mother is in love with him. She's all blushy and giggly, and Padmé tries very hard not to connect the dots, but the conclusion is there nonetheless: Anakin, subby baby boy extraordinaire, infinite black hole of mommy issues, is physically hard-wired to flirt with older women. All of them. Literally all of them.

It should be weird, but, you know what, anything that gets her mom on board with Anakin is fine with her.

What helps is that Anakin is no longer stifling his nearly overbearing inquisitive nature and therefore has approximately a thousand questions about Hanukkah, which her mother is more than happy to answer at length. Padmé strongly suspects that whenever he's looking at his phone, it's because he's taking notes. Her mother teaches him how to make latkes, and at first he's hesitant about the sour cream and applesauce, but then downs so many Padmé is worried he'll make himself sick. He's thrilled to watch her and her mother light the Hanukkah each night. They exchange gifts; Padmé got him two things—a kind of gag gift, the little pilot wing pin they give kids on planes, which he unironically loves and pins to his shirt immediately, and a Victorinox watch that matches his ring in terms of general aesthetic and durability. At work his hands get too dirty for him to pull out his phone and check the time, and he's always wanted a nice, expensive watch, but like most jewelry and certain kinds of clothes, they're a bad idea when working with engines. It's elegant, red and black, and he puts it on right away.

She opens her gift. It's a fountain pen, a Monteverde, black with rose gold and an omniflex nib.

"Mark told me every writer should have a good pen," he says. "And since you're taking workshop next semester, I figure, you know..."

He looks nervous, like she wouldn't like it. But she launches herself into his arms and thanks him, thinking about all the things she'll write with it.

On New Year's Eve, they get roped into babysitting duty. When Dormé opens the door, she looks right past Padmé to Anakin and says, "Oh my god. I get it now. Holy shit."

Anakin looks at Padmé in confusion. Padmé says, "Ignore her, baby."

"You didn't tell me he's a fucking—" She makes a jerky hand gesture up and down Anakin's body.

"Thanks?" Anakin says.

Dormé has become the size of a house and is at the waddling stage of her pregnancy. She and Emilio got invited to a party and considering they barely have a life now and definitely won't have one once the baby arrives, they decided to go out and leave Padmé and Anakin with Sam and Marie. Sam is shy to meet Anakin, keeps hiding behind Dormé's legs, but Marie runs over to him with her arms lifted and he picks her up like they're already good buddies. She launches into a detailed saga about her plans for this evening while Anakin periodically says, "Uh huh." Another win for the Anakin Skywalker fanclub.

Anakin and Emilio seem to hit it off right away, which doesn't surprise Padmé at all considering they're both *that* kind of guy, although she can't quite put a word on it. A wifeguy, her students might say.

Dormé and Emilio leave flimsy instructions for them along the lines of, don't let them eat a lot of candy and put them to bed around nine. Without detailed guidelines, Padmé is nervous—she's only taken care of them a couple times—but Anakin doesn't seem worried. Like everything else, he probably has a natural aptitude for taking care of kids.

And he does.

He's so good at it, in fact, that Padmé spends most of the evening watching *New Year's Rockin' Eve* while Anakin runs around wearing the kids out. Around nine, they do their best to put the kids to bed, but it's harder than it looks, and after about a dozen stories, it's lights out a little before ten.

When she and Anakin are finally alone in the living room, TV on low, things are tense. He sits on the other side of the couch, occasionally running his palm up and down his thigh, which is his tic for when he's resisting the urge to maul her. Padmé is feeling the same way. She wants a baby so badly she can't stand it, wants him to get her pregnant right here on her sister's couch. But she'll be good, because Dormé would kill her if Padmé got come on the upholstery.

The kindest thing Dormé has ever unwittingly done for her is arrive home several hours early that night, citing exhaustion and boredom and "Why did we decide to do this? I hate parties." And even though she's chatty and clearly wants them to hang out a while, Padmé gives her a very meaningful look and tells her they should be heading back. Dormé gives her a sardonic look in return that says, *Ah, young love. I remember that.*

They say their goodbyes, wish Dormé and Emilio a happy new year, and they're out the door. Padmé gets as far as an empty grocery store lot down the street before putting the car in park—not even in a space—and drags Anakin in to kiss her.

"I want a baby so fucking bad," she says.

He has her pants unbuttoned already and his hand down her underwear. "Christ. Me too. Fuck, you're so wet."

They somehow pull away from each other long enough to climb into the back seat. Padmé is cursing herself for trading out all her nice, easily-fucked-in dresses for the tightest jeans known to man. They manage to get just enough of their clothes off for her to sink down onto him, her back to his chest while she holds onto the headrest in front of her and tries not to hit her head on the ceiling. She doesn't let herself think about how this is a rental, or that maybe one day she'll look at her future child and remember they were conceived in the parking lot of an ALDI.

Dormé goes into labor a week before her scheduled c-section. The whole family rushes to the hospital, and even though Padmé's parents have made a living off of grace under fire, even they are too nervous for their fake smiles and easy laughter.

As always, Anakin is a godsend, quietly doing small things like getting everyone coffee and water, making cafeteria runs, driving out to Dormé's place to feed their cats. Without even being asked, he keeps Sam and Marie entertained, turns the drab hospital waiting room into a fun place for them to play, so they won't be scared the way Padmé had been scared when Dormé was born.

She was four. She doesn't remember it well, but she does remember her mother being in the hospital for a long time, remembers flashing lights and journalist questions whenever they

went outside, and for the first time she saw her father get mean, hold her close and shield her face from the cameras while he told the reporters to mind their own business.

When Dormé finally got to come home, the first time Padmé was alone with her, she played gently with her dark tufts of hair and apologized for how hard it had probably been to be born. She promised to be the best sister she could be. But she hasn't been, not even close. And that's just something she has to live with, along with all her other mistakes.

She watches Anakin play with the kids and wonders if she's pregnant too, if it'll be as bad for her as it was for her mother, as it might be for Dormé. She tries hard to push the thought away and stay positive, but it bubbles up regardless: she has a bad feeling about this.

It was a long labor, but Dormé and the baby are both fine and healthy. His name is Andre Michael. He's eight pounds, four ounces, and everyone is so happy to meet him.

"Honey, I have some bad news," Padmé says, taking a seat beside him on the couch. He's playing Madden, not because he likes it but because her father keeps kicking his ass and gloating about it, and it's starting to piss him off.

He pauses the game. "Yeah?"

"Dr. Kenobi emailed me to say one of the comp assistants is sick. He wants me to help teach the interim pedagogy practicum."

"I don't know what any of that means."

"It means we have to leave tomorrow. I'm sorry."

"Oh," he says, "that's okay."

She can tell he's disappointed, because they still have a week left and he'd made plans to hang out with Emilio so he could get out of babyland for a bit and be a person again. And she's certain Anakin had a hundred questions he wanted to ask about fatherhood. The only father he knows is his step dad, who isn't a bad guy at all but definitely wasn't a great father, and Padmé's dad, who would obviously be tipped off that they're already trying for a baby even though they're not married yet.

"I'm so sorry, honey. I feel awful. But don't worry, I texted Owen and you still have the week off, so you can have a staycation or something, okay?"

He's so clearly upset but he puts on a smile anyway, and Padmé is actually kind of grateful to be leaving early because that's a Greg Naberie move if she's ever seen one. "Sure, that sounds great."

"Uh," Anakin says, sounding panicked.

Padmé parks the rental in the return lot and keys off the ignition. "What's wrong?"

He shows his phone to her. On it is a Facebook post from her dad, a selfie he took of him and Anakin at what looks like the clubhouse when he was probably drunk. Her father looks a little ridiculous, wouldn't know his angles if you paid him, but it's impossible for Anakin to take a bad photo, so he looks like he's using one of those filters that makes him look like a model. But no, that's just his face.

The caption reads, *Spent the holidays with our future son-in-law. Proud to have this young man in our family.*

"Wow, I guess he really does like me," Anakin says.

"In retrospect," Padmé says, "I kind of wish I'd bet money on it."

They're in the TSA line again. Anakin is inspecting both of his boarding passes, looking from one to the other and back again. Padmé pretends not to notice.

"Babe, I think there's something wrong with our tickets," he says. "These say we're going to Colorado and we're sitting in first class."

She leans over a little to look at them. "Oh, that's strange. I guess we'll just have to go to Colorado."

"Is that really what happens when an airline messes up your tickets? You just have to go anyway?"

She gives him a put-upon sigh. "Unfortunately."

"You're making fun of me."

"Yes I am."

"So, what, these are fake tickets to see how I'd react, or...?"

"Or we're spending a week at a ski resort in Colorado."

He stares at her. "You're kidding. How can you afford that?"

"I can't. It's an engagement gift from my parents. And they feel really bad about making you fix all the shit in their house. Also I think they love you more than me and at this point they would buy you a pony if you asked them."

"What? I didn't even thank them. How could we just *leave* without—"

"They get really awkward when you thank them for stuff. It's for the best. That's why my dad waited until you left to get all mushy on Facebook."

They move forward in line. Anakin is still looking down at the boarding passes like they're going to tell him she's lying. "Skiing? Like with the snow? And the poles?"

"Yep, skiing like with the snow and the poles."

"Wait, what about the interim pedagogy practicum?"

"Honey."

“There is no interim pedagogy practicum, is there?”

“There is not.”

“That’s not even a thing, is it?”

“No, but it sounds definitely like the kind of torture Kenobi would inflict on new students.”

When they arrive at the resort, Anakin is so overwhelmed and distracted by the mountains that he runs into a wooden post. When they get to their room—gigantic, cozy, with a beautiful view—he presses his hands and face against the window and leaves smudges. They only last about five minutes before they start making out, frantically tugging at each other’s clothes. “Jesus Christ, finally,” Anakin says right before he holds her hips down and starts tonguing her cunt.

Briefly, very briefly, she worries they’ll spend the entire week having sex and Anakin won’t want to ski. This worry is quickly dismissed when, their first full day at the resort, Anakin straps on a snowboard and she doesn’t see him again the rest of the day.

He returns at night to eat a concerning amount of food from the buffet and then fuck her into the mattress for two hours before passing out cold. She skis twice and gets kind of tired of it, spends the rest of the trip curled up in a chair reading while Anakin makes a friend of Connor the snowboarding instructor, who drives a ’67 Dodge Charger that he’s more than eager to show Anakin. They add each other on Facebook and later that night, Anakin tells her Connor travels a lot and they plan to hang out again if he’s ever driving through the Midwest.

They end up getting a noise complaint by management, and Padmé deeply regrets letting Anakin pick up the phone, because he says, “Get thicker walls,” and hangs up.

It’s the best vacation she’s ever had.

IV.

Time passes alarmingly fast. Every month she gets her period right on time. Spring semester comes and goes. She teaches intro lit and loves workshop. Even though she’s probably the worst writer in there, she has a fantastic time giving feedback. She workshops two stories: one about a presidential campaign manager trying to run an election during the apocalypse, and another about a boy and his dying mother. She lets Anakin read the former but not the latter. He thinks she should write a novel.

When Padmé’s lease is up she doesn’t renew it, and instead moves in with Anakin. Ahsoka is happy they’ve “finally pulled their heads out of their asses” but also relatively pissed that she has to share her room, which is Padmé’s office now. As much as Padmé tries to help Anakin and her parents plan the wedding, studying for comps and working on her dissertation takes up most of her attention.

But that also means that once the semester is over, the wedding is kind of like a big surprise party. Her parents really went all out. The groom party consists of Owen (best man), Emilio, and Mark, and the bridal party is Dormé (maid of honor), Marianne the tattoo artist who is kind of Padmé's best friend now, and one of Padmé's cousins named Erica whom she doesn't know very well, but her mother insisted on it because of past family drama involving *certain people* (Padmé's aunt, her father's sister and Erica's mother) not being in the bridal party of her parents' wedding. There are hundreds of guests. The rabbi is a good family friend. The president doesn't show up, but he does send a gift. Same with the Obamas. There are plenty of other politicians there though, in addition to Padmé's entire cohort, all of the English department faculty, Padmé's family, Anakin's family, and several other dozen people Padmé doesn't even know but who are probably her parents' friends.

The wedding is the single most perfect thing that has ever happened in Padmé's life.

She passes comps, and for the next year, she buckles down to finish her dissertation. Anakin keeps calling her Dr. Padmé Amidala-Skywalker, even after she explains what ABD means. Finally, she successfully defends her dissertation, takes a couple weeks off, and hits the job market.

The best of times happened, and the worst of them begin. It's one thing to sell a house, to get it fixed up and put it up for sale and sign the paperwork knowing it's going to another family who will love it just as much as you did. It's another to simply pack up your things and walk away from it, the home you've lived in nearly your whole life, not knowing what will come of it. They can't take the dogs with them, so Anakin gives them to Ahsoka. Padmé sells the Civic. Anakin sells the Mustang, his other cars, his motorcycles. He quits the shop. All to follow Padmé to a one-year visiting fellowship in Oregon.

With the SUV packed up, Anakin stands in the front yard looking at his house, his empty house where he lived for so long, where his mother died, where he overdosed, where he recovered. Padmé waits by the car, not wanting to push him, wishing she knew how to support him, wishing she could fully understand all the tragedies of his life. If she were in his shoes, she's not sure she'd have the strength to just walk away. But that's what he does.

Padmé teaches a four/four. It's not her dream job, but the pay and benefits are good, and in this market she's grateful to have found a job at all, even if it's temporary. After the year is up, they offer her a visiting professorship and sign her on for another year.

Meanwhile, she's begun taking pregnancy tests in secret so Anakin won't get his hopes up. Every month they're negative. Finally they go to a doctor, get some bad news, and begin fertility treatment.

The university offers her an assistant professorship and, knowing they won't be leaving the state any time soon, they move out of their apartment and buy a house, which is made more difficult by Anakin's credit issues, and although Padmé doesn't want to accept her parents'

help with co-signing the mortgage and putting together the down payment, they don't really have a choice.

In September, her period is late. She takes a pregnancy test. It's positive. She wants to plan out a surprise, wait for the right moment to tell him, but she can't, just rushes out the back door without shoes on and finds Anakin trimming the hedges. She shows him the test and for a moment he's speechless, and his eyes tear up and he hugs her, picks her up, spins her around. She's too happy to acknowledge the nagging feeling in the back of her mind.

According to the ultrasound, they're having twins. A boy and a girl. Luke and Leia.

She's seven months along when it happens. It's the Monday of spring break. She's at the stove frying an egg (she lives on fried eggs now) when she starts to feel light-headed. She ignores it. Then suddenly she feels wetness between her legs and looks down to find her jeans soaked in blood.

She screams for Anakin right before her knees buckle. She holds onto the oven handle to soften the fall but she still lands hard, and by the time she hears Anakin's rushing footsteps, everything has gone black.

She's in and out of consciousness. Anakin hovers over her, his hands on her face, saying something like, *It's okay, it's going to be okay*, but he looks terrified and she can't figure out why. She smells copper. She can't really feel anything.

An ambulance siren. The feeling of being gently lifted onto something. Anakin clearly but not calmly explaining the situation, listing off her allergies, her medications.

Much later she has a brief moment of clarity. She's in a bed in the ER during the handful of minutes between admittance and whatever's next. Surgery, she guesses. Anakin is sitting down in a chair beside her bed, holding her non-IV'd hand and pressing his forehead to the back of it. She pulls out of his grasp and runs her fingers through his hair, feels a hard truth settling into place that she has no choice but to accept.

"Ani," she says.

He looks up. There are tears in his eyes. She doesn't want the last time she sees him to be so sad.

"Raise them well, okay?" she says. "Tell them I love them."

His eyes widen. "No. No no no, don't say that. You're going to be fine. All three of you are going to be fine."

"I don't think that's true, baby." She feels his soft hair under her fingertips, wants his beautiful face to be her last thought. "You're the best thing that ever happened to me, and no matter where I go, I'll always love you, okay?"

He grips her wrist and holds her hand between both of his. He's shaking so badly. "Padmé. Please. Please don't leave me."

"It's okay. Don't be afraid to move on. You have so much to give."

Two nurses arrive and unlock her bed. "I love you," she tells him, and they wheel her away.

When she opens her eyes again, the first thing she sees is Anakin slumped in a chair by her bed, asleep. She looks around for her babies but they're not in the room, and she has a feeling she knows what that means.

Anakin wakes up and sees her looking at him, launches off the seat and holds her face and kisses her.

"It was close," he tells her. "It was really close, but you're okay. You're going to be okay."

"Where are they?" she asks.

He hesitates, and in that hesitation is the only answer she needs.

"They're alive," he says. *For now*, he doesn't. "Just rest, okay? The doctors here are really good. Your parents and Dormé will be here soon."

Time pushes forward slowly. Padmé, during the short spans of time she's awake, begs Anakin to go home and sleep. Eat a real meal. Shower and shave. He goes only because her parents and sister are there with her, but he texts her the whole time he's gone.

The situation improves little by little. Every day, two steps forward, one step back. Padmé gets well enough to sit up in bed, to walk around the room. The nurses bring the babies in, and they're too small and fragile to be held, but Padmé can put her hands in a pair of gloves inset into the crib and touch them. Eventually the babies are strong enough to breathe on their own, to be held. Eventually Padmé is allowed to go home, although the babies remain in the natal ICU. Her parents are staying in the guest room, Dormé on the couch.

And then, eventually, finally, the babies get to come home too.

Padmé goes on leave the following semester. Anakin quits his job at the body shop where he's been working these past few years and decides to be a stay-at-home dad until the twins are old enough to go to school, and then he says he'll start working toward his pilot's license. The twins learn to walk and talk and climb and open doors and generally make Anakin's life as chaotic and stressful as only two Skywalker children can.

One day, when the kids are two and Padmé is up for tenure, she arrives home to find a red truck in her driveway she doesn't recognize. When she goes inside, Anakin is talking to a

middle-aged man in a trucker hat at the kitchen table, where a big sheet of paper is rolled out.

“Honey?” she says.

Anakin quickly bars her entry into the kitchen. “You’re home early.”

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“That doesn’t sound suspicious at all.”

Luke and Leia are quietly playing in their playpen, like they’re in on it. Also suspicious.

“Don’t worry about it. Are you hungry? I can fix you something.”

She lets it go for the moment.

As the weeks go by, she doesn’t know how Anakin thinks he can hide *an entire addition to the house* from her, but Padmé plays along. She comes home to an entire construction crew outside and pretends she doesn’t see or hear a thing. She turns a blind eye while Anakin is on his laptop (he finally bought his own) attempting to resolve what seems to be a zoning issue. In the evenings, after the kids have been put to bed, she tries to go sneak a peek, but Anakin always stops her. She tries to push past him and they either wrestle into a tickle fight during which they have to try to be very quiet, or he’ll just throw her over his shoulder and take her to bed, where they also have to try to be very quiet.

And finally the day comes.

“Close your eyes,” he says.

She does. She’s holding Leia who is playing with one of Padmé’s necklaces, and he leads her through the brand new door into the brand new room of their house, which smells like wood and lacquer.

He positions her exactly where he wants her and says, “Open them.”

She opens her eyes. She’s known for a while what he was doing, but she didn’t know it would be this grandiose—floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, a ladder that slides across them, boxes upon boxes of her books which have been in storage for years. An enormous bay window with a little nook like in her bedroom at home. A cozy-looking armchair under a lamp, unsurprisingly similar to the one she fell in love with at the ski lodge. Luke attempts to pull a box down on top of himself, and Anakin swiftly picks him up while saying, “No way, big guy.”

Unsure she can even get the words out, she says, “I love it.”

“Oh, thank god,” he replies casually, like he cooked a meal she enjoyed and not that he built her an entire sanctuary. He goes around pointing things out and talking a mile a minute about the challenges he had and complaining about contractors, having spent all these weeks not able to tell her any of it. Luke keeps trying to put his fingers in Anakin’s mouth and Anakin keeps interrupting himself to go “om nom” and spit them back out, which only makes Luke try to do it again. Padmé follows, listening, rubbing her nose and mouth lightly against Leia’s downy soft hair.

She remembers that day she took him out to lunch years ago now, when he was just the cute mechanic fixing her car at a severe discount. He put it all on the line that day, promised her this very room before they really knew each other, and she could see it so clearly even back then, a hopeful dream of something she didn't know she was allowed to have.